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# // Prologue //

Heartkit took his first breath and let out a small meow. He was caught in darkness. He squirmed and wriggled. He felt a few warm licks then suddenly he felt something in his heart break. He suddenly felt empty and cold. He felt broken. He felt as if something had left him and it was never coming back.

# Ch. 1

Stormpelt pushed through the bramble bush. He couldn't wait anymore. He heard the wailing of his mate, Brightheart and his heart lurched. His eyes accustomed to the dark den. Huddled in the corner was Sandwing, watching silently, bringing her kits closer to her side. He saw the dark striped medicine cat, Eagleflight, bending over a sleek tortoiseshell cat. He brushed past Sandwing and pressed his head to his mate's. She had a small kit at her mouth. It's head was coloured like her pelt and the rest of its body was milky white. Brightheart was lying still, breathing gently. Eagleflight licked the small kit instead.

"Is she alright?" asked Stormpelt. He licked his mate softly. Eagleflight shook his head.

"She won't make it," he whispered. Stormpelt felt his heart drop. His brain began to blur and his mind was blank. He couldn't accept it. He didn't understand it. He collapsed and pushed his head onto Brightheart's neck. Eaglefligt continued licking the kit.

"Help her," Stormpelt cried. "Help her! Do something!" Eagleflight looked solemn. Sadness reflected in his dark eyes.

"There is nothing I can do. Only Starclan can help now," Eagleflight said softly. "Spend as much time as you can with her." Stormpelt felt Brightheart stiffen and she lay limp. Her eyes were closed and her breathing halted. Forever.

"No," wailed Stormpelt. He choked. This couldn't be happening. He was going to have kits with her. They were going to raise their kits together. It wasn't fair. He would have gladly gone through the pain for Brightheart. They were going to raise a family. They were going to retire to the elder's den together and watch their kits grow happily in the Clan. How was he going to continue to live?

"You need to be strong," whispered Eagleflight. "You have

a kit. He needs you."

"He needs Brightheart more," breathed Stormpelt. Eagleflight dipped his head in mourning for his dead Clanmate. Stormpelt felt sadness engulf him.

# Ch. 2

Stormpelt slipped into the nursery and saw Sandwing feeding her kits and his kit. He gazed at his small kit with so much love. He wished it was enough to make him feel whole. Eagleflight followed Stormpelt in.

"Sandwing, you need to nurse Stormpelt's kit," Eagleflight said.

"And Brightheart's," added Stormpelt, his tail low. His voice was soft and tainted with sadness.

"Another kit!" gaped Sandwing. "I can barely manage my own. Ugh." Stormpelt felt anger overwhelm his sadness and flicked his tail angrily.

"He is your Clanmate!"snapped Eagleflight. "He is a kit of Shadowclan. You cannot reject him. Are you a loyal Shadowclan cat or not?" Sandwing looked unsure.

"But I don't need another kit!" protested Sandwing. "I didn't want to have kits in the first place."

"How could you!" growled Stormpelt, he bristled angrily. "You are given the honour to nurse another kit, a future Shadowclan warrior. The deputy's kit! *My* kit!" Sandwing looked taken aback. Stormpelt was a muscled dark grey striped cat. He was handsome and brave and he was the deputy.

"Fine," she said finally. Stormpelt barred his teeth without a word and bent down next to his kit. He licked it gently. "What will you name him?"

"Heartkit," whispered Stormpelt. Sandwing nodded approvingly. Stormpelt's Clanmates would think he was naming it after Brightheart but he had decided on Heartkit because heartkit was what was left of Stormpelt's heart. He didn't even want to think

about losing his kit. He would keep him safe forever.

"Take care of him as if he were your own kit," whispered Stormpelt. He licked his kit once last time then was escorted out by Eagleflight.

"Brightheart wouldn't want you to neglect your kit by mourning her," Eagleflight told him.

"I...," Stormpelt stammered. "I don't know how I'm going to go on without her."

"You're setting vigil for her tonight. You will mourn her and then you will go on. Because that's what she would have wanted and she still wants it. For you. And for Heartkit," said Eagleflight sternly.

"Thank you, Eagleflight," Stormpelt dipped his head. Eagleflight was right. He flicked his ears once more at the nursery and heard Sandwing muttering then padded towards the camp entrance.

# Ch. 3

Stormpelt took Heartkit by the scruff and brought him outside. The air was crisp and fresh. Leaf-all had begun a moon ago. Stormpelt put Heartkit down onto the dirt.

"Wow!" cried Hearkit. "Our camp is so big." He wriggled and tried to scramble away to explore. Stormpelt nudged him gently but his small feet weren't strong enough to let him scramble up yet. He looked up at Stormpelt with a pout.

"I wish I could walk," he sighed. He was half a moon old but he wanted to see the big world waiting outside the nursery for him.

"Then walk," Stormpelt nuzzled Heartkit forward.

"What if I fall?" asked Heartkit.

"Then I'll catch you," assured Stormpelt softly. Sandwing slipped out of the nursery.

"It's ok if you can't walk, Honeykit learnt how to walk when she was a moon old and Firkit and Lionkit only learnt when they were a moon and a half," said Sandwing. "You should go back to the nursery."

"It's alright," Stormpelt said. "If he wants to try, he can."

"Well don't be disappointed when you don't manage," shrugged Sandwing. Stormpelt felt his pelt bristle.

"Why can't you be more encouraging?" he whispered angrily at her.

"I'm being honest," replied Sandwing with a flick of her tail.

"Just go back to the nursery!" snapped Stormpelt. He turned to Hearkit who was watching him intently with a worried look. He

nudged him gently. "Come on Heartkit, you can do it!" Sandwing stalked back into the nursery

"But Sandwing said," moaned Heartkit.

"Screw what Sandwing says, she's just an old grumpy she-cat," said Stormpelt. Heartkit giggled.

"But she nurses me," meowed Heartkit. Stormpelt sighed. Although Sandwing did nurse him, she never showed any kind of motherly affection towards his kit. He was slightly relieved as Brightheart should have been Heartkit's mother but also slightly sad as Heartkit would never know what it would be like to have a mother.

"Yes, and you should be thankful and love her and respect her for that, but you don't need to listen to her discouraging words," Stormpelt said finally. Heartkit nodded vigorously and using all his might, got up onto his paws and wobbled forward. He screamed in delight and Stormpelt pounced on his paws in pride.

"I did it!" cried Heartkit so loud, a few cats in the clearing turned to him. Sandwing poked her head out of the nursery.

"Quit shouting," she said then saw Heartkit scampering around. Her eyes widened and she disappeared into the nursery, grumbling to herself.

"I'm so proud of you!" smiled Stormpelt. Heartkit stumbled around the clearing. A few cats purred with amusement and gave him small licks of encouragement. Stormpelt puffed his chest out with pride. He watched his kit with love. Cindertail came over and watched Heartkit with a smile.

"Brightheart would be proud," she said warmly, watching Heartkit wrestle with a small branch. "You're doing such a great job raising him with Sandwing!" Stormpelt felt his smile fading an he frowned. Cindertail saw his face and quickly apologised.

"Sorry, I didn't mean...," she trailed off. Stormpelt smiled in reply.

"It's alright," he said. "Sandwing really is helping. "It's what Clanmates are for." Cindertail nodded then congratulated Heartkit before padding away. Dandelionfrost trotted over to Stormpelt.

"He's doing so well," she said. Stormpelt felt like his head was going to burst with pride.

"Thank you," he said simply, dipping his head. Pinestar trotted over to him. He spotted Heartkit and ginned.

"Hey Heartkit! You're walking! You're the youngest kit to learn to walk!" he exclaimed. "Good job! You're going to be a great Shadowclan warrior."

"Thank you Pinestar!" cried Heartkit happily. He trotted to his father's side who licked him warmly.

"I thought you'd want to take a hunting patrol out this evening," explained Pinestar. "Thunderclan has been coming close to our borders." Stormpelt nodded. He bent down to Heartkit.

"I need to go now, Heartkit. I'll bring you back to the nursery but I'll come and see you before you sleep, alright?" asked Stormpelt.

"Why?" asked Heartkit sadly. "I want to stay out here."

"Not right now," Stormpelt said gently. "I need to go. Go back to Sandwing." Heartkit pouted but sighed and stumbled towards the nursery.

"He's going to be a strong warrior, I can see that," Pinestar said, dipping his head before padding off. Stormpelt raced after Heartkit then made sure he was settled down before going to the warrior's den to gather a border patrol.

# Ch. 4

Heartkit growled and jumped at the dark orange, almost red striped kit. He sunk his small teeth into the other kits neck and they rolled onto the ground with a thud. Dirt sprayed around them, making the den clouded and hard to breath in.

"Come on Firkit," came a voice, coughing slightly. Sandwing lay, watching them intently. "H'es two moons younger than you. Show me what a warrior you can be!" Firkit swung Heartkit off his back and hissed.

"I'm going to beat you up," he said grandly but he waited a moment as Heartkit shook himself. Once he was sure Heartkit was ready, he got into a crouched position and they wrestled in a mess on the ground. Honeykit, a cream coloured cat, watched them, cocking her head with excitement.

"Come on Firkit!" she cheered, jumping to her paws. Lionkit, a light orange, almost yellow cat watched sleepily. He yawned, showing his small fangs.

"You're going to regret messing with me," Heartkit said puffing his chest as he threw Firkit off his back. Firkit leapt at Heartkit, and rolled him to the ground. Then he pinned the kit under him. He howled in triumph then jumped off. Heartkit frowned and brushed himself off. Firkit prodded him playfully.

"It's ok, you're two moons younger, you'll win next time," Firkit assured Heartkit. Heartkit nodded unsure.

"We'll see about that," scoffed Sandwing.

"Good job Firkit," smiled Honeykit, ignoring Heartkit. She puffed out her fur and curled up next to Lionkit, who was already snoring gently.

"Do you want to have a rest?" asked Sandwing. Firkit

shook his head.

"I'm going outside," he said. Heartkit padded over to Sandwing and curled up next to her, feeling her hat warm him up.

"You should go out," Sandwing told him, shuffling away from him. Heartkit gave her a confused look. "Go join Firkit. Get some fresh air." Heartkit nodded and shrugged before pounding after Firkit.

Stormpelt brushed through the bracken and back into the camp sheltered by large trees. He spotted Heartkit and Firkit under the log near the elder's den. Whitecloud was dozing off next to them, Riverclaw and Crowtail were talking to the kits. Stormpelt left his patrol, instructing Deerdapple to report to Pinestar about the patrol. He trotted to his kit. He came up behind Heartkit and nudged him forward. Heartkit topped over with a cry of surprise. He quickly sprang out and turned to Stormpelt.

"Hey!" he cried.

"Hi," smiled Stormpelt. Heartkit raced to Stormpelt and nuzzled his leg. His eyes sparkled, happy to see his father. "Hello Crowtail, Riverclaw, how are you doing today?"

"Great actually, thank you," smiled Crowtail. He had been in the elder's den for a few moons now. He longed for the time when his legs worked properly and when his nose was still sharp.

"We were just telling the kits about our fights at the Carrionplace," Riverclaw explained. He licked his dark tabby fur. Stormpelt shivered. He'd been an apprentice then. The rats had been big and deadly, not fearful of Shadowclan. They had even attacked a few cats and bitten Daisyfoot but she had healed luckily.

"Ooh," shivered Stormpelt. "That was one of my scariest experiences as an apprentice." He licked Heartkit. "I'm going to get something to eat? We can share." Heartkit jumped around with excitement.

"Yes please!" cried Heartkit. "I fought with Firkit today, he

won but he's two moons older and he said that one day I would win!" Stormpelt's eyes twinkled with amusement and affection and he glanced at Firkit. He sat straight, his muscles rippled under his fur. He was so young yet so brave and strong. *I'll make a deputy and leader out of him yet,* thought Stormpelt to himself.

"Thank you Firkit," Stormpelt dipped his head. "We'll leave Riverclaw and Crowtail alone now, come along, you can come and take something from the fresh-kill pile as well." Firkit raced after Heartkit excitedly. Riverclaw dipped his head in respect.

"Thank you," he said. Whitecloud shifted in her spot.

"Is that you, Stormpelt?" she rasped. Stormpelt approached her.

"Yes, Whitecloud, do you need anything?" he asked.

"No no no," she said, yawning and slowly pushing herself up. "You know, I may have breathing problems but I know a bright and brave kit when I see one. Heartkit will grow up to be a strong cat and warrior, I know it."

"Thank you, Whitecloud," Stormpelt said, his chest bursting with pride.

"Why don't you go join them?" Whitecloud said, her voice coarse. "Heartkit and Firkit are waiting. Brightheart would be so proud." Stormpelt suppressed a sad smile as he thought of his lost mate. He trotted towards his kit and Firkit. They were eyeing the fresh-kill pile seriously.

# Ch. 5

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather around the Tall Stump!" called Pinestar. He leapt onto the stump in the middle of the clearing and his gaze swept over camp. Cats filed out of the warrior's den and a few apprentices stood by the Tall Stump, looking nervous and excited. Their mentors tried to calm them down. Heartkit peered out of the nursery.

"Come back in," said a stern voice. Heartkit turned to see Sandwing looking at him with a frown.

"Why? I want to see the meeting!" Heartkit protested.

"You heard Pinestar, are you old enough to catch your own prey?" asked Sandwing angrily.

"No....," Heartkit trailed off. His tail dipped. Honeykit and Lionkit watched him disapprovingly, curled up underneath their mother's belly. Firkit couldn't sit still, pricking his ears to listen to the meeting. Just then a grey cat pushed his head in and Heartkit meowed in happiness. Stormpelt licked Heartkit then looked at Sandwing.

"I'm taking Heartkit to see the meeting," he informed her.

"But he's not old enough," she said.

"He'll be right outside," said Stormpelt firmly. "Firkit, Lionkit, Honeykit, would you like to come too?" Firkit sprung to his paws and nodded but Lionkit and Honeykit looked at Sandwing expectantly.

"No, you're not going," she told them firmly then looked at Firkit. "Come back here."

"It's his choice," Stormpelt said, looking at Firkit. "Go on

out first Heartkit." Heartkit sprung out and Firkit hesitated. Sandwing glared at him expectantly. As Firkit was unsure, he saw Stormpelt's steady gaze on him. The Clan deputy gave him permission! Surely the deputy's word was more important than his mothers. He padded to the entrance of the nursery. Sandwing gaped.

"Come back Firkit," she snapped.

"He's going to be fine," muttered Stormpelt, ushering Firkit out.

"you have no right!" bristled Sandwing. Stormpelt lifted his eyebrow.

"Oh really? Who is deputy?" he asked then turned on his heels and padded out. He was just on time to hear Pinestar give three apprentices their new names.

"Shadepaw, from this moment on, you will known as Shadefern. Starclan honours your bravery and skill. Rosepaw, from this moment on you will be known as Roselight and Starclan honours your intelligence and kindness. Nightpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Nightcloud. Starclan honours your determination and spirit. We welcome you, Shadefern, Roselight and Nightcloud as full warriors of Shadowclan." Stormpelt smiled broadly. He loved seeing his Clan growing and new apprentices becoming warriors. He was so proud of the being deputy to such a strong Clan.

"Shadefern!"

"Nightcloud!"

"Roselight!" Heartkit yelled at the top of his lungs. He and Firkit were on their paws, joining in on the chorus of cheers and congratulations of their Clanmates. Stormpelt watched them proudly. He couldn't help but smile. When the commotion was over and the three new warrriors prepared for their vigil, Heartkit and Firkit talked excitedly together. Night was coming.

"Come on," Stormpelt said, nudging Firkit and Heartkit towards the nursery. "It's almost time to sleep."

"But you need to say goodnight," moaned Heartkit.

"I promise I'll come before you sleep but I need to go talk to Roselight, Shadefern and Nightcloud alright?" promised Stormpelt. Heartkit nodded and he and Firkit trotted into the nursery. Stormpelt approached the young warriors. Shadefern had a black tabby cat with piercing yellow eyes and lean muscles rippling under her sleek fur. Roselight was a light brown tabby cat with gentle and passive eyes and a calm and sweet nature. Nightcloud was black with only his tip of the tail white. He had green eyes which shone bright and sparkled with determination. Stormpelt walked over to the new warriors.

"Shadowclan is honoured to have such strong warriors," he told them. Roselight licked her chest fur with embarrassment and pride, mumbling a shy thank you. Shadefern puffed out her chest and smiled slyly while Nightcloud dipped his head back in respect to the deputy.

"Thanks," nodded Shadefern.

"We too are honoured," Nightcloud said. Although Shadefern didn't show it as much as Roselight, the three newly made warriors were all bursting with pride and joy that the deputy had come to speak to them.

"I am happy to be a deputy of a Clan with such strong and smart warriors," nodded Stormpelt.

"Thank you, Stormpelt," Nightcloud almost stammered.

"Yeah thanks, we're really happy too," Roselight said, almost in a whisper. Stormpelt smiled and left the three cats to settle down. He entered the nursery quietly. All of Sandwing's kits were sleeping calmly. Heartkit sighed in relief when Stormpelt entered and gave him a lick of affection. Sandwing turned her head away and closed her eyes.

"Goodnight," whispered Stormpelt. "I love you. Bightheart and I love you." Heartkit smiled blissfully.

"Goodnight," replied Heartkit, smiling, in a soft whisper.

# Ch. 6

Heartkit awoke to Sandwing prodding him.

"Wake up," she whispered. Heartkit opened one of his eyes. "Firkit, Lionkit and Honeykit woke up long ago. Go join them." Yawning, Heartkit scurried away. He spotted Firkit, Lionkit and Honeykik by the Tall Stump. He rushed to them.

"Hey Heartkit!" cried Firkit. "I'm the Shadowclan leader, Firstar. You can be my deputy, Heartfall. Lionkit is Lionear and Honeykit is Honeystar. They're both from Windclan!" Heartkit nodded. He wriggled his tail and barred his teeth. Honeykit leapt at him, paws extended. They bundled to the ground with furious squeaks and squeals. Heartkit was barely aware of Firkit and Lionkit wrestling beside them.

"Hey kits," called a voice. Heartkit froze as he recognised the voice. Honeykit pinned him to the ground with a howl of victory but Heartkit just pushed her off and padded to the large grey warrior. "Do you want me to teach you fighting techniques?"

"Yes please!" cried Heartkit. Firkit nodded enthusiastically. Stormpelt smiled at his kit, giving him a gentle lick.

"How about you two?" he asked Lionkit and Honeykit. They looked at him for a while then glanced at the nursery but then smiled.

"Yes!" answered Honeykit. Stormpelt crouched into position. The four kits copied his position. Then a black and white young tom trotted towards them. His eyes darted from side to side and he was lean and small.

"Spiderpaw!" Stormpelt said. "Why don't you join us? Look, reposition Lionkit for me." Spiderleg beamed and trotted over to Lionkit's side. He pressed his back lower and repositioned one of his paws.

"Good," congratulated Stormpelt, eyeing the four kits. He noticed that Heartkit and Firkit had the best positions and felt pride swell in him. "Now, Spiderpaw, why don't you show them a front paw blow?" Spiderpaw nodded enthusiastically. Spiderpaw crouched and brought his front paw out and cuffed Stormpelt on the head. Stormpelt ducked and smiled.

"Very good," he praised. Spiderpaw grinned.

"How did you dodge it so quickly?" he asked.

"Practice. I'll show you another time but I'm sure Skytail will teach you," replied Stormpelt, turning to the kits. "It's always good to start learning to fight early. Just in case. Come on, let's try the front paw blow." Heartkit smiled and turned to Firkit. They both crouched, facing each other, eyes locked and concentrated. Heartkit swiped at Firkit and hit him on the head. Firkit shook his head and blinked.

"That was great!" grinned Firkit.

"Good job Heartkit!" praised Stormpelt warmly, giving Heartkit a small lick. "Now make sure to balance on your back paws." Goldenheart padded to Stormpelt's side, watching the kits with amusement.

"We're going on a hunting patrol," Goldenheart informed Stormpelt. She looked at Spiderpaw. "Would you like to come?"

"Sure," shrugged Spiderpaw, giving Lionkit one last suggestion then trotting to the camp entrance.

"Right," Stormpelt nodded. He glanced at the kits. "You kits play for a while. I need to sort out a few patrols." He smiled at Heartkit. "You're doing great, keep it up." He nodded to Goldenheart. "Who's going with you?"

"Cindertail, Shadefern and Spiderpaw," said Goldenheart. Stormpelt glanced over at the warrior's den where Rabbitleap was resting just at the entrance.

"Take Rabbitleapt as well," Stormpelt ordered. "Leaf-bare

is coming." Goldenheart nodded and headed over to Rabbitleap. Heartkit watched Stormpelt in awe.

"You're going to organise patrols?" he asked.

"Yes, you can come," smiled Stormpelt. He let Heartkit trot behind him as he approached Weaselscar.

"Stormpelt," acknowledged Weaselscar. "Do you need me to do something?"

"Could you take Roselight, Deerdapple and Dandelionfrost to patrol the Windclan border. Another patrol is at the Thunderclan border already," Stormpelt told him. Weaselscar nodded.

"Now?" he asked.

"Soon, but you need to wait for Deerdapple, she's out with Darkpaw but I think she should be back soon," explained Stormpelt. He scolded himself for not arranging the patrols earlier. He was the Shadowclan deputy for Starclan's sake. He sighed and glanced at Heartkit. His heart warmed and he beckoned Heartkit over to the apprentice's den.

"I'm going to check which apprentices are still there. I don't think the elder's have been fed yet. Why don't you ask them?" Stormpelt suggested. Heartkit raced of, proud of his job. He returned, chest puffed out.

"No, they haven't eaten yet and they said the apprentices are making a mouse dung of a job to feed them," smiled Heartkit. Stormpelt rolled his eyes and cuffed Heartkit softly on the ear. His eyes sparkled with amusement.

"Don't say that," he warned not very seriously.

"But that's what Crowtail said!" exclaimed Heartkit. Stormpelt peered into the apprentice den. Duskpaw was lounging on the ground with Spottedpaw.

"Spottedpaw, Duskpaw," called Stormpelt sharply. They knew it was their duty to feed the elders. Duskpaw and Spottedpaw

quickly got up and shot out of the den, standing in front of Stormpelt nervously.

"Yeah?" asked Duskpaw timidly.

"You know you're supposed to feed the elders," Stormpelt said sternly but gently. Duskpaw and Spottedpaw nodded solemnly.

"Sorry," they muttered being shooting away. Heartkit watched them with tilted heads.

"I'm going to do a great job feeding the elders," he announced after a while. Stormpelt chuckled.

"I hope so," he said softly. "Why don't you go join the other kits? I need to do a few more things." Heartkit nodded quickly and scurried off. Stormpelt watched him with love bubbling inside him.

# Ch. 7

Heartkit had just turned three moons. He grinned as Stormpelt wrestled him to the ground.

"My little kit is three moons old!" he cried happily. Sandwing watched them from the dark nursery. Stormpelt caught her eye but she turned away.

"Go thank Sandwing for nursing you all these moons," whispered Stormpelt. Huffing, Heartkit trotted to Sandwing.

"Thanks Sandwing," he said. Sandwing raised her eyebrow and snorted. She rested her head on her paws.

"I never asked for kits," she mumbled. "I never asked to raise kits alone..." Stormpelt pricked his ear. He heard her.

"Who is the father?" Stormpelt asked.

"I guess there's no use hiding it from anyone. We never even talk anymore," Sandwing growled under her breath. "Clawpelt." Stormpelt tilted his head. Clawpelt was one of the fiercest cats in the Clan. He had never wanted kits as he had said it "distracted" him from his duties. Pinestar had told Stormpelt he would be a good leader but Stormpelt disagreed. Clawpelt would never feel the love of fathering kits. He wouldn't ever love a mate. What kind of leader would that be?

"He's never talked to the kits," frowned Stormpelt. Sandwing turned her head away.

"The kits were never supposed to happen," she muttered. "We were never supposed to happen."

"But you love your kits. Nothing could change that," Stormpelt soothed. Sandwing didn't answer. Heartkit returned to Stormpelt's side.

"I'm sure Clawpelt is very proud of your kits," whispered Heartkit. Sandwing turned her eyes at Heartkit. They were sharp and calculating. Stormpelt pushed Heartkit gently away and led him towards the fresh-kill pile.

"Why don't you chose something to eat?" suggested Stormpelt. "Sandwing wants to be alone." Heartkit pounced at the pile and took out a large robin. He dropped it at Stormpelt's side and ate it heartily. After several big bites, he had enough and pushed it over to Stormpelt who devoured it in one bite. A patrol had returned with more fresh kill. Heartkit bounded up to them, followed by Stormpelt. Leading the patrol was Clawpelt.

"You caught that?" gasped Heartkit, looking at a large vole in Duskpaw's mouth. She nodded proudly. Stormpelt smiled.

"Good job," he nodded. Heartkit searched the clearing and spotted Firkit, Lionkit and Honeykit by the warrior's den, wrestling on the ground. He bounded up to them. Stormpelt watched them then looked at Clawpelt. His eyes followed Heartkit to Firkit, Lionkit and Honeykit. Stormpelt saw Clawpelt turn away quickly and pad the other direction. Stormpelt sighed.

"Go see them," Stormpelt said. He padded beside Clawpelt. Clawpelt shot him a confused look. "Your kits." Clawpelt bristled.

"I don't have kits," he said.

"Are you saying Firkit, Honeykit and Lionkit aren't yours?" questioned Stormpelt. He stopped Clawpelt from walking out of camp.

"They were a mistake," hissed Clawpelt. "Sandwing told *you*?"

"I am the Shadowclan deputy," retorted Stormpelt. "So yes she told me."

"Well it's none of your business," Clawpelt said, turning away.

"It is," said Stormpelt firmly. "Go talk to them. You don't need to tell them you are their father but they are your Clanmates whether you like it or not. You'll find one day you might be fighting beside each other." Clawpelt reluctantly agreed and shuffled towards the kits. Stormpelt watched, passive. Clawpelt approached the kits and lingered near them unsure. Then Firkit sprung at him and bit into his tail. Clawpelt's fur bristled but he relaxed and forced a smile. He glanced at Stormpelt and growled slightly but he seemed more at ease with the kits. Suddenly, Sandwing was by Stormpelt's side.

"What have you done?" she accused.

"I made sure Clawpelt knew your kits are his Clanmates. He cannot ignore them forever," Stormpelt assured.

"It's none of your business," growled Sandwing. "He *can* ignore them forever. He chose to!"

"Not anymore," said Stormpelt firmly.

"He's a bad father," Sandwing turned her head away. Her pelt was unbrushed and dirty. "The kits don't deserve to know him." Stormpelt smiled, Sandwing did love her kits. And she wanted to protect them.

"I know you want to protect them but look how well Clawpelt is doing," Stormpelt said. "It won't hurt your kits." Sandwing huffed but slunk away back into the dark nursery. Clawpelt was playing with the kits, wrestling with them. Heartkit was clutching onto him on his back. Stormpelt smiled. He watched as his kits clambered over Clawpelt's strong and muscled body then slide down with a thump on the floor. Stormpelt's eyes gleamed with amusement and love.

# Ch. 8

Heartkit jumped to his small feet and bumped into Sandwing's chin. She grumbled and shoved him away. He pricked his ears and listened. Firkit stirred and opened one eye.

"What is it?" mumbled Firkit.

"Yeah," muttered Sandwing. "Go back to sleep. Or rather, go out and check out what that noise is." Heartkit trotted to the entrance and heard a shuffling behind him and Firkit joined him. They both poked their heads out of the nursery. At the entrance, cats had gathered around a border patrol. The kits looked at each other excitedly and bounded to the entrance. Heartkit spotted Stormpelt, pushing through the crowd with Pinestar. The kits watched from behind the muddle of cat feet. They pushed past a few cats, dodging feet and stumbling. Daisyfoot frowned as she spotted them.

"Kits!" she cried. "You shouldn't be here!" Stormpelt turned to the crowd and glanced at Daisyfoot. His eyes widened when he saw the small kits stumbling. He ordered the crowd back and bent down. Heartkit felt teeth pull him up by the scruff and he was lifted over many cats and then down by the side of his father. Daisyfoot brought Firkit up to Stormpelt by his scruff as well. Stormpelt frowned at Heartkit and Firkit. They could have been trampled.

"Heartkit! Firkit!" bristled Stormpelt. "You shouldn't go through a crowd like that. This isn't the time to meddle." The kits looked down at their paws solemnly. Heartkit felt a wave of embarrassment. Sighing, Stormpelt turned back to the border patrol.

"What happened?" interrogated Pinestar. Cindertail, Roselight, Dandelionfrost and Darkpaw were standing facing Pinestar. Darkpaw's eyes glittered. She was almost bouncing up with excitement. Heartkit watched in wonder. Dandelionfrost scolded Darkpaw in a whisper. Darkpaw quickly stopped fidgeting

and stood to attention.

"We were patrolling the Thunderclan patrol," reported Cindertail.

"Roselight!" cried Stormpelt suddenly. He spotted her fur clotted at her back, near her tail, tainted with blood. "Go to Eagleflight this minute!" Roselight seemed reluctant.

"It's nothing," she grumbled. Stormpelt knew it was not nothing. Young warriors were insufferable.

"Stormpelt is right," Pinestar said firmly. "Go to Eagleflight now. Why didn't you tell us you were hurt?"

"We didn't know!" gasped Cindertail. "We all escaped without scratches and Roselight didn't tell us and we didn't see."

"Escaped?" echoed Pinestar. Stormpelt nodded at Roselight to go and she trudged towards the medicine den. Heartkit pricked his ears excitedly. Firkit was fidgeting beside him, nervous and excited.

"Yes, a Thunderclan patrol had crossed and when we tried to talk them to go out but there were six of them and only four of us. And we had an apprentice. We had to flee," sighed Cindertail. Darkpaw looked ashamed.

"They crossed our border?" bristled Stormpelt angrily. "We need to send a patrol at once!"

"Yes, but don't need to be rash," Pinestar said calmly. "I want all of you checked by Eagleflight then I'll make a patrol." Stormpelt huffed then realised the kits were still there.

"Awww!" pouted Heartkit. "I wish I could go."

"Stupid Thunderclan!" spat Firkit.

"Yeah, stupid furballs," growled Heartkit.

"Foxdung!" cried Firkit.

"Back to the nursery, you two!" he ordered. The kits, scared of Stormpelt's harsh tone, scampered away. Pinestar turned to Stormpelt.

"I will go on the patrol," Pinestar told Stormpelt. Stormpelt shook his head.

"You will not," he hissed under his breath. "You are on your last life. You can't risk it."

"I won't be risking my life," retorted Pinestar.

"I'll go," Stormpelt said. "We still need someone at camp."

"Fine," Pinestar sighed then took action. "You will take Clawpelt, Weaselscar, Deerdapple, Oakfall and Mousewhisker." Stormpelt nodded. "And take Duskpaw as well. She's going to be a warrior in two moons and an extra cat will help. But you *must* watch out for her." Stormpelt nodded quickly then rushed to gather the cats.

"Clawpelt! Weaselscar! Deerdapple! Oakfall! Mousewhisker! Duskpaw!" shouted Stormpelt. The cats gathered around their deputy.

"Yes?" asked Clawpelt excitedly.

"You are coming to Thunderclan border with me right now. Weaselscar, make sure Duskpaw does not get into trouble. You will all look out for her. I will be next to you as well," Stormpelt said, glancing at Duskpaw. She nodded furtively. Her pelt bristled with excitement.

"Remember, try to talk it out first," Pinestar said, padding to their side. "I don't want to jump to conclusions. Stormpelt, I trust you to do that." Stormpelt assured Pinestar he would although he just wanted to charge at the Thunderclan cats and get revenge on them. He knew his warriors felt the urge as well.

"Then take care and fight well. May Starclan be with you," wished Pinestar. The cats nodded in respect and acknowledgement and bounded off after Stormpelt.

# Ch. 9

Heartkit peered out of the nursery, impatient. Firkit pushed his head beside Heartkit's.

"Are they back yet?" asked Firkit. Heartkit shook his head numbly. He was sure his father would return victorious.

"Get back in here," ordered Sandwing. "When they come back, they won't want kits meddling and getting in their way." Heartkit was about to retort but he nodded and retreated from the entrance.

"I bet they're gonna win," Firkit cried happily.

"Shadowclan always wins," assured Sandwing. "They will win. Now come." Heartkit shuffled next to Sandwing and closed his eyes just as some shouting and the noise of cats approached. He sprang onto his paws and rushed out of the nursery. Firkit was right behind him. They burst from the den and saw the patrol of Shadowclan cats, injured, panting but victorious. Stormpelt had a few scratches on his muzzle, bleeding badly and he had a few bites on his tail and back but his eyes shone with victory and excitement. Pinestar rushed to them with Eagleflight. Heartkit raced towards Stormpelt but Skytail took him by the scruff.

"Stormpelt is hurt," she said, putting him down. He watched as Eagleflight tended to him. Stormpelt caught Heartkit's eye and smiled.

"You won?" cried Heartkit, springing to his paws. Skytail stopped him with her paw.

"Of course," Stormpelt said painfully. He winced as Eagleflight wrapped one of his wounds. Pinestar was making sure the cats were not too badly injured then returned to Stormpelt's side.

"What happened?" he asked.

"The patrol had gone deeper into our territory. We got them back to their side of course. Although we won both sides were badly injured. I'm sure they'll come back," Stormpelt reported. Pinestar let a hiss escape.

"We will double our patrols there with twice as many cats for each patrol," growled Pinestar. "Four cats will hide but will watch the patrol so Thunderclan do not think we're paranoid." Stormpelt nodded in agreement.

"I will go one one of the patrols," Pinestar decided then spotted Heartkit and Firkit. "One day you will be one of the strongest warriors fighting Thunderclan and Windclan." Heartkit bounced up in happiness and Firkit beamed with pride. Stormpelt watched his kit with a smile.

"Ouch," he muttered as Eagleflight pressed on his wounds on his muzzle.

"You will have these scars forever," Eagleflight reported. "You need to rest for four days."

"I don't expect you to go out of camp for five days then," Pinestar said firmly. He turned to Eagleflight. "How long do the others need to rest?"

"Three days minimum," Eagleflight reported.

"You will all rest for three days. No exceptions," Pinestar announced to the patrol. Clawpelt threw his head back and moaned.

"Three days is too much," he protested. "I barely got hurt." Pinestar glared at him and he shut his mouth. Pinestar nodded to Stormpelt and beckoned him to his den.

"I'll come and see you later Heartkit," Stormpelt said. "Go back to Sandwing."

# Ch. 10

Heartkit and Firkit shared a crow. Heartkit spat out a big feather and grimaced.

"I don't like the taste," he complained. Firkit shrugged.

"I'll eat it if you don't want it," he said indifferently. Heartkit sighed.

"When is Stormpelt coming back?" he said.

"He'll be back soon," assured Firkit. "He's with Pinestar, they'll be fine."

"Of course they'll be fine!" cried Heartkit. "I just can't wait to know how Thunderclan fled from them like cowards." A cat approached them from behind. It was Cindertail. She sat beside the kits.

"Thunderclan are not cowards," Cindertail assured the kits. "They're warriors and they fight like warriors."

"Why are you defending them?" accused Heartkit. Firkit lashed his tail in agreement.

"The worse thing you could do as a warrior is under estimate your enemy," said Cindertail, looking at the kits glumly. "You can call Thunderclan whatever you like but you must know, they are strong and they know how to fight. Of course, we are strong too and we know how to fight as well but never, ever underestimate your enemy." Heartkit frowned, deep in thought.

"You're right!" decided Firkit. "I'm almost six moons old so I'll become an apprentice soon and then I'll fight Thunderclan!" Heartkit pouted. He wanted to be an apprentice as well but he needed to wait two more moons.

"Look, they're back," Cindertail said, flicking her tail at the

entrance. Pinestar and Stormpelt weren't injured except for a few scratches but the other cats seemed to be a bit more ruffled. Eagleflight rushed over to them, scolding a few cats gently. Heartkit bounded to Stormpelt.

"What happened?" he cried. Stormpelt shook his head, dismissing his kit. His head swam with thoughts of revenge, fear, wanting to defend his kit and Clan, hate and tactics.

"Stormpelt!" Heartkit said, pawing at the ground.

"Not now Heartkit," snapped Stormpelt angrier than he meant. Heartkit sprang back. His eyes cast down sadly and hurt. Stormpelt scolded himself for being so harsh to his kit. The hurt look on Heartkit's face broke Stormpelt's heart. His face softened in apology.

"Sorry, I'll tell you about it later, alright? I need to talk to a few cats," Stormpelt said. Pinestar nodded to Stormpelt.

"We need to tell the Clan about this," sighed Pinestar. "I will call a meeting. Clawpelt, Goldenheart, Deerdapple and Rabbitleap, make sure Eagleflight gives you a check up." The patrol of wounded cats nodded solemnly. Pinestar flicked his tail at Stormpelt. They both walked towards the Tall Stump. Firkit joined Heartkit and they watched a distance away.

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey gather around the Tall Stump for a Clan meeting," called Pinestar. Cats milled around, whispering about Thunderclan and casting worried looks around. Heartkit felt the unease of the Clan. His pelt pricked with curiosity.

"As most of you know," Pinestar said. "I took out a patrol today to Thunderclan once more. After two weeks of peace, they have come back. A patrol attacked us and we were not strong enough to fight back." Gasps and hisses rang out. Heartkit didn't know whether to feel sad they were not a strong Clan or angry at Shadowclan warriors for not being strong enough.

"Enough!" shouted Pinestar. All cats silenced. "Yes, we did

not win and Thunderclan has come deeper into our borders but next time, we will drive them back and we will get our revenge. From now on, you will each have a battle training once a day. Clawpelt, you will train one group of five cats. Rabbitleap, you will train another group of five cats. Stormpelt will train five other cats, he has already chosen and Cindertail shall train the rest. Clawpelt, Rabbitleap and Cindertail, I will talk to you about the training this evening."

"I can't believed Shadowclan lost," mumbled Firkit disappointed. "Thunderclan will think weak." Suddenly, Cindertail appeared behind them once more.

"Then they are stupid. As I said before, never under estimate your enemy," said Cindertail. Heartkit pondered about it for a while. He decided that Cindertail was a wise cat indeed and he would talk to her more often.

"We will double our patrols," announced Stormpelt. "And if you see a Thunderclan cat so much as sniff our border, claw their pelts off!" A cry of agreement rose. Pinestar watched with fixed eyes.

"But do not underestimate our enemy," he added. Then he leapt off the tree stump and walked away. The cats slowly dispersed, talking excitedly within themselves.

# Ch. 11

Heartkit pushed his head into Stormpelt's warm fur. He sniffed the warm scent of his father and smiled blissfully. Stormpelt laughed and gave his kit a quick lick.

"How are you doing in the nursery?" asked Stormpelt. "Learnt any new skills?"

"Yes," nodded Heartkit. "But Sandwing is always grumpy."

"You need to let her rest and don't get on her nerves. Kits are a lot to handle," Stormpelt explained nicely.

"But she's so grumpy!" complained Heartkit. "Can't I sleep with you?"

"Heartkit. We've gone over this," Stormpelt sighed. "I'm a warrior. Not to mention, the *deputy*. I need to tend for my Clan. I would love to stay the whole day in the nursery with you but I can't, the Clan needs me. And I'm very busy."

"Ok...," mumbled Heartkit. "But Firkit is going to be an apprentice soon." Stormpelt smiled. He had talked about it with Pinestar. He was always glad for new apprentices. He hadn't told Heartkit that the apprentice ceremony would be that day as Heartkit would surely go tell Firkit.

"And?" asked Stormpelt amused.

"I'll be alone with Sandwing," replied Heartkit.

"Sandwing has been nursing you since you were born," Stormpelt said sternly. "Show some respect." Heartkit sighed. Stormpelt looked up and noticed Pinestar watching him. Pinestar beckoned Stormpelt over with his tail. Stormpelt realised it was time for the ceremony. He quickly got up and asked Heartkit to stay where he was. Pinestar jumped onto the Tall Stump and called the

Clan. Cats gathered around and Heartkit spotted Sandwing standing close to her kits. She was licking Lionkit's fur carefully. Heartkit suddenly understood. It was Firkit's apprentice ceremony! He grumbled inwardly. Sandwing then scolded Honeykit and quickly licked down some of her fur standing upright. Firkit sat up, straight to attention, brave and rigid.

"Firkit, Lionkit and Honeykit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your apprentice name, you will be known as Firpaw, Lionpaw and Honeypaw. Lionpaw, you have asked to take the path of a medicine cat and your mentor shall be Eagleflight. I hope Eagleflight will pass down all he knows on to you. Honeypaw, your mentor will be Oakfur. I hope Oakfur will pass down all he knows to you and teach you to follow the warrior code well. Firpaw, your mentor will be Stormpelt. I know Stormpelt will pass down to you all he knows and more," declared Pinestar. Heartkit gaped. Firpaw's mentor was Stormpelt! Sandwing's eyes shone with pride and happiness. One of her kits was being mentored by the deputy and the other was training to be a medicine cat. The new apprentices touched noses with their mentors.

"Firpaw!"

"Honeypaw!"

"Lionpaw!" Cats called out the names of the new apprentices. They all crowded around them, especially Firpaw. A few apprentices and maybe even a warrior or two shot a jealous look at Firpaw. Heartkit shook away the feeling of sadness and rushed over to Firpaw.

"You're an apprentice!" he yelled happily. Firpaw puffed his chest out and beamed broadly with pride.

"I know! And my mentor is the deputy!" he cried in happiness. Stormpelt walked over to their side. His eyes shone with pride and happiness at the new apprentice he had to train. He was going to teach Firpaw everything there was to know about the warrior code and Shadowclan. Pinestar stood at the Tall Stump, watching Shadowclan with happiness. After the shouting had died

down, he smiled and called the cats to attention once more.

"That is not the only good news today though!" said Pinestar. "Duskpaw, Darkpaw and Spiderpaw, please come up. I, Pinestar, leader of Shadowclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn. Do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" The young cats, shaking with pride and excitement looked down at the cats gathered around them and in strong voices declared in unison, "I do."

"Then by the powers of , I give you your warrior name. Duskpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Duskblaze. StarClan honours your bravery and intelligence. Darkpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Darkspeck and Starclan honours your fighting skill and strength. Spiderpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Spiderfur. Starclan honours your cunning and sharp senses. We welcome you all as full warriors of Shadowclan."

"Duskblaze!"

"Darkspeck!"

"Spiderfur!" The calls were even louder than before and the whole clan gathered around to welcome the new warriors. When the commotion had died down, Stormpelt turned to Firpaw. Heartkit watched his father expectantly. He had said they were going to share some food together then he would teach him a few tricks. But Stormpelt turned to Firpaw with a bright smile.

"Come on Firpaw, I'm going to bring you out to see Shadowclan's territory," Stormpelt said, touching his tail to Firpaw's shoulder. "You're going to love it!" Firpaw jumped excitedly, eyes sparkling. Heartkit's mouth hung open.

"But you said you were going to play with me," complained Heartkit. Firpaw frowned. Stormpelt sighed and gave Heartkit a stern look.

"Heartkit, go back to the nursery, please," said Stormpelt frustrated. "I'm sorry I can't play with you. I'm mentoring Firpaw." Heartkit's eyes almost popped out.

"But..but...," he stammered.

"Heartkit," said Firpaw harshly. "I'm an apprentice now, not a kit. I'm going to learn things. And Stormpelt needs to teach me things and he can't do that when he's playing with you." Stormpelt sighed.

"Heartkit, Firpaw is right. Go back to Sandwing alright? I'll be back tonight," Stormpelt said as if brushing away an annoying kit. Which was exactly what he was doing. Stormpelt turned tail and walked towards the camp entrance with Firpaw by his side. Heartkit watched them, his heart sinking.

# Ch. 12

*The she-cat had soft and sleek. Her pelt was white tortoiseshell. Her eyes shone bright with a fire of warmth and love. Heartkit approached her and rubbed his side onto her paw. Her fur was warm and soft. She purred gently then bent down and gave him a loving lick on the head. Her eyes shone with love as she looked down at him. Heartkit's heart beat faster.*

*"No matter what, Heartkit, you're never alone," whispered the cat. Heartkit's heart skipped a beat. He knew her. She was the cat which had left a small part of him when he was just born. The small hole he felt whatever he did.*

*"Why did you leave me?" asked Heartkit sadly. He could imagine a life with her in Shadowclan. How he would feel love all the time, who he would run to whenever he was hurt. The cat he would cuddle up next to at night. Stormpelt tried his best to be with Heartkit but he was always busy.*

*"I'm in Starclan now," soothed the cat. Brightheart. Heartkit had never heard Stormpelt say her name out loud.*

*"Can you come back? Why can't you come back and live with me and Stormpelt," cried Heartkit. Brightheart sighed and lay down. She curled her long tail around her kit and tapped him lightly on the head. He felt love and warmth surge through him. The grass beneath him was soft and the song of the stars above him soothed him. He wished he could feel this everyday.*

*"Because Starclan is my home now," explained Brightheart gently, licking her kits tenderly. "Sandwing is taking great care of you." Heartkit frowned and shook his head.*

*"No she's not! She's so grumpy," he mumbled.*

*"Don't say that. She's been taking care of you since you were*

*born," Brightheart scolded firmly but lovingly. Heartkit sighed. He pawed at Brightheart's soft fur.*

*"But we need you still," said Heartkit. "Thunderclan is always crossing our borders."*

*"Heartkit. Hard times are coming ahead for you. But you must remember, I'm always up here, watching you. Me and Stormpelt will always be there for you. No matter what. Don't lose sight of us, alright?" Brightheart breathed gently.*

*"How would I ever forget?" Heartkit frowned.*

*"Because sometimes bad things, really bad and sad things happen and you think the world is against you," explained Brightheart softly.*

*"But only Thunderclan is being a nuisance. They're not the whole world!" Heartkit exclaimed.*

*"Hopefully, one day you'll understand, little one," whispered Brightheart. Heartkit buried his face in her fur.*

Heartkit jolted awake. He was sleeping outside the nursery, waiting for Stormpelt and Firpaw to arrive. Sandwing wasn't in the nursery, she had left a bit before to go hunting. She had been very happy to get out of camp and hunt alone for the first time in six moons. Suddenly, Stormpelt and Firpaw burst into the clearing. Firpaw had a skip to his step and Stormpelt talked to Firpaw with pride. He told a few things to Pinestar, purring madly. Heartkit frowned. Then, Firpaw retreated to the apprentice den and Stormpelt spotted Heartkit. He trotted towards his kit, eyes sparkling. His mind though, was somewhere else.

"I saw Brightheart," Heartkit told Stormpelt. Stormpelt stopped in his tracks at the mention of his mate.

"Heartkit, it's not good to lie," sighed Stormpelt finally. Thinking about Brightheart grieved him and to hide it, his sadness would turn into anger at times.

"I'm not lying!" exclaimed Heartkit. "I saw her in Starclan.

She told be Starclan was her home now and she was happy there." Stormpelt let out a growl.

"Heartkit, don't talk about things you don't understand! You're just a kit! You don't know anything!" spat Stormpelt. His pelt bristled angrily and he stormed off. Heartkit watched in dismay and confusion. He didn't know what he had done wrong. He had only tried to tell Stormpelt that Brightheart was happy now. He sighed and slumped to the ground, feeling suddenly alone. He suddenly wished Sandwing was back in the den, grumbling and complaining. But she wasn't. She was out hunting, too busy for him as well.

# Ch. 13

Heartkit slunk into the nursery. Stormpelt had gone out once again and it was almost night. The nursery was empty. Heartkit just wanted to curl up under Sandiwng and sleep. He didn't understand why Stormpelt was angry and he didn't want to talk to him either. The nursery was dark and eerie with nobody inside. Heartkit felt a loneliness around him and stifled a yawn. He wondered when Sandwing was returning. He curled up into a ball, feeling no warmth. He closed his small eyes and tried to sleep. Sleep wouldn't come. Finally, he crept out of the nursery to find Sandwing. He spotted her near the warrior's den, eating a mouse. He raced up to her, suddenly feeling lighter.

"Sandwing!" he cried. "When are you going to sleep? The nursery is really cold." Sandwing watched him with cold eyes tinged with...guilt.

"I'm going to sleep when I finish my meal," answered Sandwing. Heartkit shuffled next to her and and waited for her to finish. Finally, she finished the mouse and she got up. Heartkit bounced up happily. Time to sleep.

"Goodnight Heartkit," said Sandwing. Heartkit followed her as she turned around and padded away. She entered the warriors den and disappeared. Heartkit trotted up to the warrior's den, confused. He cocked his head, waiting for Sandwing to come back out. He sat down and waited. The warrior's den was quiet and only the soft sound of breathing could be heard. After a while, Heartkit had a feeling Sandwing was not coming out again till the morning. The camp entrance's brambles ruffled and Stormpelt appeared, slinking back into camp. He spotted Heartkit, not sleeping yet. He felt a pang of guilt. He shouldn't have gotten angry. Heartkit should have long been sleeping beside Sandwing in the nursery. He padded towards his kit. Heartkit looked up and his face turned into an uncertain smile. Stormpelt brushed his tail to Heartkit's flank and bent down to nuzzle him.

"I'm sorry I got angry," he apologised softly. "Why aren't you sleeping?" Stormpelt felt giult engulf him. Heartkit shrugged sadly.

"Sandwing is sleeping in the warrior's den," he admitted.

"What do you mean?" cried Stormpelt, anger rising.

"She went to sleep in the warrior's den," Heartkit repeated. Stormpelt softened and looked at his kit lovingly.

"I'm going to talk to her," Stormpelt said. He entered the warrior's den and spotted Sandwing, curled up in her corner in her nest. He prodded her on the stomach and she rolled away and hissed. Her eyes slowly opened then when she saw Stormpelt, she sprung to her feet.

"What is it?" she asked. Stormpelt bristled.

"You're sleeping here?" he accused. "You're going to leave Heartkit alone, to sleep in the nursery?" Sandwing looked away, ashamed.

"He's not my kit. I've had enough, doing nothing for six moons," she said.

"That doesn't mean you can leave him alone. Has these last four moons, taking care for Heartkit not brung love for you?" Stormpelt bristled. A few warriors awoke and mumbled but then realised it was Stormpelt and watched sleepily.

"Well, he's not my kit," Sandwing turned away.

"He's my kit!" Stormpelt shouted angrily.

"I'm not going back to the nursery," Sandwing said finally. Stormpelt felt fury bubbling in him and stormed out. He marched to Pinestar's den. Pinestar, hearing the commotion, joined him outside, eyebrows raised.

"Sandwing does not want to sleep in the nursery. She's leaving Heartkit alone," Stormpelt almost growled. Pinestar soothed Stormpelt.

"You are the deputy, you should be the one talking to her," Pinestar said. Stormpelt almost said "but you're the leader".

"Stormpelt, Heartkit isn't Sandwing's kit so it is her choice. I can't force her, only you can talk to her," Pinestar said gently. Stormpelt sighed, seeing sense.

"I don't want to talk to her," he said and walked away towards Heartkit. He picked Heartkit up by the scruff and brought him into the nursery. He lay down and Hearkit looked at him with curious eyes.

"Where's Sandwing?" he asked.

"I'm sleeping with you," Stormpelt told Heartkit. Heartkit bounded up to his father's side, glowing with happiness. "Goodnight Heartkit. I love you." Stormpelt had never had a better sleep then sleeping with his kit. His heart

# Ch. 14

Stormpelt blinked his eyes open. He looked down at Heartkit, curled up next to him. Heat from Heartkit's small body warmed Stormpelt up. He smiled. Heartkit looked so peaceful he didn't want to disturb him but he needed to get up. Slowly, he crept away from Heartkit. Heartkit murmured incomprehensibly then slowly opened his eyes. He saw Stormpelt getting up and sprung to his paws suddenly.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I need to mentor Firpaw," explained Stormpelt. "Go to sleep alright? I'll come and see you later."

"Ok," murmured Heartkit. Stormpelt gave him a small loving lick then slipped out. Heartkit was left alone in the den.

Stormpelt finally entered the camp an trotted to Heartkit after talking to Firpaw.

"Heartkit!" smiled Stormpelt. Rabbitleap passed them and shot Stormpelt a look.

"You've moved into the nursery?" Rabbitleap said, almost as an accusation.

"I'm not leaving Heartkit to sleep alone," replied Stormpelt indifferently. Rabbitleap scoffed.

"The deputy shouldn't be sleeping with his kit in the nursery," Rabbitleap said. Stormpelt sighed. He couldn't bring himself to be angry. He knew these kind of circumstances were not normal to the clan so they're normal reaction would be to treat it badly. He needed to change these cats' thinkings.

"I am the deputy, I take care of my Clanmates, of my Clan. Taking care of Heartkit is part of my job," Stormpelt explained.

Rabbitleap opened his mouth to say something but closed it again and walked away.

"Right," he muttered as he padded off. Stormpelt sighed and led Heartkit to the nursery.

"I need to sort a few things, alright?" Stormpelt said. "I'll come and sleep with you later, go to sleep now though." Heartkit nodded numbly and retreated to the nursery without a word. Heartkit slipped into the den, feeling lonely. He had felt Stormpelt tense when Rabbitleap had accused him. He knew Stormpelt was not supposed to be with him in the nursery. He knew Stormpelt was slightly ashamed. Stormpelt watched as Heartkit disappeared into the den. He felt guilty for feeling slightly ashamed and embarrassed and hoped Heartkit hadn't sensed it. He knew he would never leave Heartkit alone. He loved him too much.

Stormpelt snuck into the nursery and curled up next to Heartkit. He felt the warmth of his kit an love bubbling deep in him. Heartkit reminded him of Brightheart and he finally knew that Brightheart was happy and she was watching them proudly from Starclan. He licked Heartkit warmly in apology for getting mad at him. In apology for being busy all the time. Stormpelt frowned. Being a deputy took all his time and he had a kit now. A kit who didn't have a mother or a she-cat nursing him anymore. Heartkit needed him more than ever but Stormpelt's duties were keeping him from his kit. He sighed, he would have to do something about that.

# Ch. 15

Heartkit crawled towards the mouse. He was going to do it this time. He got ready to jumped, tensed, took a deep breath, almost jumped, waited a little longer...he pounced. Riverclaw pulled his tail away quickly and Heartkit hit the ground instead. He gave a muffled cry of frustration. Whitecloud smiled with amusement.

"Heartkit! You need to move faster. Any mouse would have seen that coming," Riverclaw instructed with a sigh. Heartkit nodded.

"You know, you would be a great hunter if you would just not hesitate," sighed Crowtail. "As Riverclaw has been trying to tell you all this time."

"I'm sorry," muttered Heartkit. "I just get a feeling it's not the right time sometimes." Riverclaw sighed and nodded.

"But once your choose to pounce, no more hesitations," Riverclaw said. "Your instincts on when to pounce are never wrong when you're a Shadowclan cat." Heartkit nodded distractedly, he had just seen Roselight returning into the clearing, looking sligthyl ruffled. Stormpelt bounded up to her with Firpaw at his side. Heartkit watched with interest.

"What's wrong?" asked Stormpelt. "Did you find anything?" Roselight nodded.

"Thunderclan has been going into our border once again," she said. "I saw two. A mentor and her apprentice. She was mentoring her apprentice in our territory! I scared them away but she managed to bite me." Stormpelt called Eagleflight quickly then turned to the Tall Stump. He looked for Pinestar but Pinestar had gone on one of the hunting patrols.

"Daisyfoot, Goldenheart and Clawpelt, come with me! Firpaw, you may follow," ordered Stormpelt. He spotted Heartkit

and smiled at him reassuringly. Firpaw smiled excitedly, his eyes sparkling.

"You'll beat them!" Heartkit cried. Stormpelt nodded then turned and slipped out of camp with his patrol behind him.

"Oh I wish I could go and claw their pelts off myself," grumbled Riverclaw. Crowtail sunk his claws into the ground and nodded angrily. Heartkit sighed. He was alone once more.

Stormpelt slunk into camp and spotted Pinestar. He had had a good day, protecting Shadowclan with his patrol and acting as deputy, but he knew what must be done. He padded over to Pinestar and flicked his tail. Pinestar stopped talking to Cindertail and walked up to Stormpelt.

"Good job today," congratulated Pinestar.

"Pinestar...," Stormpelt trailed off. He didn't know how he was going to say it. He couldn't bring himself to say it in his head himself.

"Is something wrong?" Pinestar asked worriedly. "Should I call Eagleflight?" Stormpelt shook his head.

"It's about my being the deputy," said Stormpelt. Pinestar gave Stormpelt a concerned look.

"Do you not like it?" asked Pinestar.

"No no I do. I love feeling like I'm protecting my Clan as much as I can and that I'm leading Shadowclan to victory and peace and.., I love taking care of my Clan," Stormpelt said. He realised how much being a deputy meant to him. He loved it but he had made a decision. Heartkit needed him more.

"What is it then?" asked Pinestar.

"I don't think I can be deputy anymore though," said Stormpelt in a hoarse voice.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Pinestar.

"Heartkit doesn't have a mother. Which means he needs me more," Stormpelt finally said.

"This is about Heartkit?!" burst Pinestar. "You're taking the most care of him by protecting your Clan and serving your Clan. You're a great deputy Stormpelt, that's why I chose you. Not Clawpelt, not Cindertail. You." Stormpelt hung his head.

"But- I can't...," Stormpelt trailed off. Pinestar's head drooped and he looked wary.

"It's your choice," Pinestar said finally.

"And that's what I choose," Stormpelt mumbled. His whole body was telling him to say no, to just back away. He didn't want this. But Heartkit needed him and that was enough. "My duties are keeping my from Heartkit." Pinestar nodded sadly and bit back a protest. Stormpelt had been a great deputy.

"Then we'll have to tell the Clan soon and I need to choose a new deputy," Pinestar said. Stormpelt nodded numbly. He couldn't face his choice anymore. So he fled. He ran out of camp.

# Ch. 16

Heartkit snuggled against Stormpelt's food. Stormpelt kept his head high although tears brimmed in his eyes. He watched from behind the crowd as Pinestar leapt onto the Tall Stump.

"Don't be sad Stormpelt," whispered Heartkit. Stormpelt forced a smile.

"There's nothing to be sad about," he agreed numbly.

"After seven moons of loyalty, great care, kindness, fighting and leadership, Stormpelt has decided to step back from the role of deputy," announced Pinestar. Although nobody would have known it, Pinestar was tense and reluctant at his words. Only Stormpelt noticed, he knew Pinestar well. The cats were unsure of what to do and turned to Stormpelt, murmuring thanks and many other words.

"He will be returning to being a warrior of Shadowclan," Pinestar said then locked eyes with Stormpelt. He dipped his head. "Thank you for everything you've done to protect Shadowclan." Stormpelt nodded and dipped his head in response. Howls of thanks rose.

"As you know, I need to chose a new deputy," Pinestar continued. Cats murmured between themselves, each glancing at Clawpelt. Clawpelt smiled and puffed out his chest. "I say these words before , so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors and Stormpelt may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy of Shadowclan is Cindertail." The young, peaceful and intelligent warrior padded up. She looked proud to be able to serve her Clan. Pinestar smiled at her. Clawpelt's jaw hung open and his fur rose slightly but he still called out Cinertail's name. Stormpelt turned around and nodded to the nursery.

"Come on, I'm not busy anymore. We can sleep early together in the nursery," sighed Stormpelt. Heartkit smiled, his eyes

bright and scampered to the nursery. Stormpelt's heart fluttered with happiness at the sight of his kit's smile and trotted after him. Cindertail caught up after him.

"Stormpelt," she said then dipped her head. "Thank you for your service." Stormpelt smiled sadly then tried to joke.

"Don't act as if I'm gonna die soon. I'm still a warrior," he teased. Cindertail smiled unsurely. Stormpelt ducked into the nursery.

# Ch. 17

Stormpelt trotted into the clearing. Dawn had passed a long time ago and he had spent the morning with Heartkit. He felt refreshed and happy. He went over to Cindertail, wondering if he was needed for something. She was deep in conversation with Pinestar. He lingered near them, unsure what to do. Cindertail spotted him and smiled, stepping back so he could join them. She seemed to still think of him as if he were the deputy. He appreciated the small act and nodded.

"We should ask Stormpelt what he thinks," Cindertail suggested. Pinestar seemed unsure but he nodded. Stormpelt hadn't changed, he was still the same brave and smart cat even if he did not have the same rank as before.

"Thunderclan has come so deep into our territory, we think they're going to try and take over," Pinestar reported finally. Stormpelt's jaw dropped. He wished he was deputy so he could do something about it.

"I think we should talk it out with them," Cindertail said. "We don't know if it's their intentions yet." Pinestar shrugged.

"I think it's pretty clear their intentions and we need to attack," Pinestar said. Stormpelt frowned.

"I agree. We need to attack. They've been playing around our territories for too long. We need to teach them a lesson but not just a random attack. We need to plan it. Take them when they're not ready. Maybe we *should* talk to them and try to figure it out and they'll drop their guard," Stormpelt said. Pinestar nodded and smiled. This was his deputy. Cindertail looked disappointed. Pinestar hadn't agreed with her and she had just started being a deputy.

"Stormpelt. I always knew you were the right deputy for Shadowclan. We should talk to Birdstar. Then we'll go into their

territory and ambush them. We will wreck as much havoc as we can. Then we will leave," Pinestar nodded, a plan forming in his head. "We will leave with a warning." Cindertial tried to join in.

"We could talk to them first then take their territory," she said. Pinestar shook his head.

"No, they've already gone too far. This war has been going on for too long. We will attack their camp," growled Pinestar.

"We should have patrols of cats," nodded Stormpelt. "Each will direct their attack to a different part on Thunderclan and at different times." Pinestar nodded fiercely.

"Yes, that's right," he smiled at Stormpelt. "I've got it! Come back to my den later with Riverclaw and Eagleflight." He padded away. Cindertail tried to hide the hurt from her face.

"Hey, it's ok," assured Stormpelt. "I've been a deputy far longer than you. And I'm even a deputy anymore. Sometimes your ideas won't be good but that doesn't need to discourage you. Plus we used part of your idea." Cindertail nodded thoughtfully although not completely convinced.

"But he wants to meet with you, Eagleflight and Riverclaw. Not me," she said. Stormpelt sighed, she was the deputy. She needed to toughen up.

"So you're the deputy you are allowed to go if I am. You need to take control," Stormpelt said firmly.

# Ch. 18

Pinestar, Stormpelt, Eagleflight, Riverclaw and Cindertail sat in a circle together.

"Pinestar, why is Stormpelt here?" sighed Eagleflight, he had not meant it in a mean way but he eyed Cindertail sympathetically.

"He came out with our first string of idea," said Pinestar.

"So? Don't you think you or Riverclaw would have thought of it?" asked Eagleflight. Stormpelt shuffled on his paws uneasily. "Or Cindertail?" Pinestar sighed and nodded.

"But Stormpelt used to be the deputy, he knows these things," Pinestar said. He looked apologetically at Cindertail who sighed. Eagleflight pursed his lips but shrugged.

"Pinestar, all I'm saying is that you have a new deputy, work with her," Eagleflight said then turned to business.

"I'm sorry Cindertail if you've felt that I've been ignoring you," Pinestar apologised. "I just, I'm still getting used to Stormpelt not being... deputy." Riverclaw sighed.

"Ha, you never acted like that when I became elder!" he joked.

"Riverclaw..," Pinestar started but Cindertail cut in.

"We need to talk about Thunderclan," she reminded them. She hoped interrupting had been a good cue. She wasn't used to this and felt shy. From the corner of her eye she saw Eagleflight nod in approval and she continued, feeling more confident. "I think we should talk to Falconstar, see what she's thinking, coming into our territory. But I think they've come into our territory and crossed out boundaries too often and when a patrol is escorted to their camp to

see Falconstar, other patrols should go into their territory and their camp from another direction and we'll attack inside." Pinestar looked thoughtful then nodded.

"Yes," Stormpelt agreed. "And the first patrol will be close enough to attack Falconstar herself."

"Yes and that would be a distraction and then our other patrols would come in and attack them from behind. They'll never know what got them!" joined in Pinestar.

"The cats who go to see Falconstar should only be three maximum," added Riverclaw. Excitement built in the den. "It should be you, Cindertail and maybe Oakfall and Mousewhisker. They're the calmer cats and they won't suspect anything." Cindertail nodded in agreement.

"And before they can do any damage, our other patrols will come in from all directions," Pinestar said.

"When you go there, Cindertail, you will ask Falconstar what Thunderclan cats are thinking, trespassing and you're going to try and talk her out of it. They'll probably mock us and that will be the greatest time to show them they're wrong!" Stormpelt said.

"I know a battle move we could use and I want our cats to be trained more to fight together, as one, not as individuals going solo," Pinestar added. The meeting and talk about the attack got more and more heated, more plans and ideas on the training, battle technique and mostly revenge.

# Ch. 19

The plan was made. A patrol would go early in the morning to talk to Falconstar. There would be three of them, Cindertail, Mousewhisker and Oakfall. Then when they disappeared from sight, five patrols of five cats would follow. They would split up and head for the camp. They would reach it before Cindertail and her patrol but they would keep a good distance, silence any cat they saw to make sure they didn't alert the camp then wait in hiding. When Cindertail entered camp they would give her 180 seconds. If they heard fighting earlier though, they would go in early. But they wouldn't give more than 180 seconds. And they would attack. They would bring down their wrath onto Thunderclan. Thunderclan had been bothering them for too many moons, Heartkit only remembered fights with Thunderclan and his Clanmates coming back injured because of Thunderclan.

Heartkit watched as the five patrols of six cats got prepared. They had been trained for the last moon to fight together in their small team of five and some four. Heartkit had seen them, they fought so well now it looked like they could read each other minds. Clawpelt's patrol had Roselight, Nightcloud, Spiderfur. Pinestar's patrol had Daisyfoot, Goldenheart and Nightcloud. Dandelionfrost's patrol had Skytail, Weaselscar and Rabbitleap. Birchstep's patrol were with Duskblaze, Darkspeck and Sandwing. The last patrol was of five cats. The leader being Stormpelt with Littlestorm, Featherflame, Sorrelclaw and Flamefrost. There would only be six warriors remaining in camp and the apprentices to protect the Clan. It was dangerous but Pinestar and Cindertail were ready to take the risk. Heartkit trotted over to Stormpelt's side. He was talking warmly to his team.

"Stormpelt," whispered Heartkit. Stormpelt looked down and smiled.

"Hey Heartkit," smiled Stormpelt. "I'm going to see you after our victory, all right?" Heartkit nodded.

"You won't get hurt..., right?" murmured Heartkit. He suddenly felt scared. It felt like the whole Clan was leaving to fight and possibly die.

"Of course not, I have a great team, we'll all watch each others backs," reassured Stormpelt. Featherflame tapped Heartkit warmly on the shoulder.

"I'll make sure nothing happens to Stormpelt," she told him.

"Yeah, we're all there for each other," agreed Flamefrost. Littlestorm gave Heartkit a small lick of comfort. Stormpelt felt a burst of warmth and pride at his small team. He had been training with them for a moon and he trusted them with his life. They were like his other family. And as he had gotten to know them better, they had also spent time with Heartkit. Heartkit felt as if he had an even closer family than Shadowclan. He looked up at Stormpelt's patrol.

"None of you are going to die, right?" Heartkit mumbled softly. Sorrelclaw bent down to Heartkit, sympathy glowing in her eyes. She gave him a reassuring lick.

"We will take care of Stormpelt. None of us are going to die. We will protect each other with our lives," promised Littlestorm.

"Yes, we swear we will protect each other," swore Featherflame.

"I still want to play with all of you," whispered Heartkit. "I don't want anybody to die."

"Nobody is dying," Stormpelt assured Heartkit. He nuzzled Heartkit, closing his eyes. He felt so much love for his kit.

"It is time!" announced Pinestar. "Patrols, move out." Stormpelt smiled at Heartkit, gave him one last lick and padded away. The rest of Stormpelt's team each gave Heartkit a reassuring lick then trotted after Stormpelt. Heartkit watched as the last cats filed out of the camp entrance. Shadowclan camp seemed lonely

and deserted. The three apprentices were pacing around, looking disappointed. Only Lionpaw was nowhere to be seen, probably helping Eagleflight. Firpaw spotted Heartkit, sitting lonely alone. He padded over.

"Hey, you ok?" asked Firpaw distractedly. Heartkit shook his head. He was six moons in a moon but he didn't feel excited. He didn't want to go into a world when he would be able to go out and fight other cats. "Why did Stormpelt not want to be deputy." Heartkit looked up at Firpaw, confused.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I was the apprentice of the deputy," Firpaw said with a small growl. "And then Stormpelt decides he isn't good enough to be deputy." Heartkit shook his head.

"It's not that," Heartkit mumbled.

"Whatever," muttered Firpaw, seeing Spottedpaw looking his way. A light orange warrior padded towards Heartkit. He had green reassuring eyes.

"Heartkit," smiled Sunwhisper.

"It's quiet," whispered Heartkit. He ached for Stormpelt to come back. For his warm look and the pride in his eyes.

"I know but soon, they'll all come back, victorious," assured Sunwhisper. Goldenheart approached them.

"Eagleflight is calling for you," she nodded to Sunwhisper. "And you can come too Heartkit." Heartkit trotted after Goldenheart and Sunwhisper. Eagleflight was ordering around the four apprentices who grudgingly took herbs in their mouths or trotted out of camp to find more.

"Since you aren't doing something right now, help me sort out these herbs, I'm assuming we're going to need them," Eagleflight said darkly.

"What do you need me to do?" asked Sunwhisper.

"I need you to go out and get cobwebs. *You*, little Heartkit, I need you to bring out these herbs over there and arrange them well. Goldenheart, please fetch as much wet moss as you can," ordered Eagleflight. Heartkit busied himself, moving the herbs right next to the entrance, putting them in neat piles. The work was tedious but Heartkit soon fell into rhythm.

# Ch. 20

Heartkit waited and waited. He had finished sorting the herbs a long time ago. He was tired of waiting yet that was all he could do. He sighed and curled into a ball in the middle of camp, pricking his ears for any sign of Stormpelt, Littlestorm, Featherflame or Flamefrost. A cat nudged him gently. He opened one eye.

"Hey, you alright there?" asked a voice. Heartkit recognised it. It was Dustbreeze.

"Why aren't they back yet?" moaned Heartkit, close to tears.

"They should be back soon," assured Dustbreeze. Sunwhisper joined them.

"They *will* be back soon," agreed Sunwhisper.

"Stormpelt is an awesome fighter," added Dustbreeze. "He'll be fine." Heartkit wasn't so sure but nodded.

"We outnumber all of the Clans that's for sure," Sunwhisper said. "We have twenty eight warriors. Most clans only have twenty at most. We'll be fine for sure." Heartkit felt reassured with the two muscled warriors beside him. He nodded and drifted to sleep, the waiting had been too long.

# Ch. 21

Heartkit's head filled with the pounding steps of cats. He leapt to his paws. Dustbreeze, Sunwhisper, Goldenheart, Thistlenose and Raggedscar bounded up to the entrance excitedly. Eagleflight scolded them.

"Get out of my way," he said angrily. "I need to treat the hurt cats." The six warriors backed away solemnly. The first cat into camp was Pinestar followed by his small patrol and Cinderpelt. They had blood running down their faces and their eyes looked dull. Heartkit gaped. The retched smell of blood and sweat mingled in his nose. Eagleflight leapt to Pinestar and Cinderpelt's side to help but Pinestar shook his head.

"You need to tend to the others, some are very badly hurt," he said then disappeared into the crowd. More cats came in, all panting and covered in blood. They lay on the ground, resting while Eagleflight went from one to the other. Heartkit saw the cat who was injured the most, Deerdapple. One of her ears was gone and her back foot was limp. Heartkit almost retched at the sight. He waited patiently as more cats filed into the camp, none of them Stormpelt. Heartkit waited, his heart pounding. Then Flamefrost, Featherflame and Sorrelclaw limped into the camp with Pinestar. Heartkit's heart skipped a beat. In Flamefrost and Sorrelclaw's jaws they dragged a dead cat. He's fur was ruffled and splattered in blood which had already dried. His head hung limply to the side. Heartkit couldn't help himself, he spewed onto the ground, the sight oo much for him to handle.

"Is he going to be alright?" cried Waspnose, looking at the cat hung in Flamefrost and Sorreclaw's jaws. Pinestar hung his head.

"He's dead," murmured Pinestar. Cats around gasped and mumbled sadly.

"Littlestorm was brave and loyal. He died saving his clan,"

murmured Waspnose then eh frowned. "Where is Stormpelt?" Heartkit didn't even care if they had won, all he cared about was if his father was alright. Pinestar spotted Heartkit and took a step towards him but Stormpelt's patrol stopped him and murmured something into his ear. They came forward to Heartkit and sad in a circle around him.

"Where is Stormpelt?" asked Heartkit.

"Stormpelt..., has joined Brigtheart," whispered Featherflame, her voice broke.

"I'm so so sorry," Flamefrost whispered. "We promised- we promised we would protect him with our lives." Heartkit stared at them, unable to process the information.

"Stormpelt?" he stammered. "Where is he?"

"Heartkit honey, Stormpelt isn't coming back," murmured Sorrelclaw. "He died saving Pinestar's life." Pinestar padded up behind them. The whole Clan was silent, mourning for their two dead Clanmates.

"He was a loyal, brave and honest deputy and he was the best warrior I could have ever chosen for the job. He died saving me..., and I will always be grateful," said Pinestar, eyes sad. He didn't add "I should have died, not him".

"Heartkit. I'm so so sorry, we swore to you. We promised you...," croaked Featherflame hoarsely. Sorrelclaw hung her head in guilt and shame. Pinestar turned away, not wanting to let the flood of sadness take him away. Heartkit stood, feeling alone even with all of them cluttered around him. He felt cold and dark. His eyesight turned blurry. He would never feel the warmth of Stormpelt's licks. He felt another part of him break and something inside him was gone. Now, where there used to be half a gap in him there was a full gap. He felt empty without Stormpelt or Brightheart. The feeling pierced him and drove him into sobbing of hopelessness. There was no reason for him to live. He collapsed to the ground.

# Ch. 22

Heartkit was barely aware of anything happening around him. He felt cold and numb. His thoughts were mixed up and made no sense. He wished he could wake up from the nightmare. A cat licked him. Her tongue was warm but it made no difference to Heartkit, in fact, it almost made him feel colder. It wasn't Stormpelt licking him anymore. A cat took him by the scruff and brought him to the nursery. Stormpelt's scent was strong and Heartkit thought he was there for a moment but he was then put to the floor and the warm breath of many cats could be felt and he knew Stormpelt wasn't there. He shivered and wished he could stay like this, feeling numb without facing life without Stormpelt forever. Eagleflight's voice was like an echo.

"Flamefrost, all of you, out," Eagleflight ordered. "You stink of blood and Heartkit needs space and rest." He then bent over to Heartkit and licked him gently. "Heartkit, I'm going to get Lionpaw to look after you, I need to tend to the other cats. Don't leave us, ok?" Heartkit didn't understand what Eagleflight meant but Heartkit sure was hoping that he could leave to never feel this pain anymore. Eagleflight slipped out and a few moments later, Lionpaw padded into the den. He curled around Heartkit. Heartkit didn't even notice.

"You're going to be alright Heartkit," soothed Lionpaw. "Stormpelt was a strong warrior. We will mourn for him, but he's with Brightheart now. It's your turn to be strong." Heartkit barely heard him. He had never talked to Lionpaw, only rarely when they were kits. He was closer to Firpaw, Lionpaw's brother but somehow, Firpaw seemed more hostile and unknown to Heartkit now. He felt more comfortable with Lionpaw.

"Heartkit? Can you hear?" Lionpaw said. "Heartkit?" Heartkit's mind was a whirl. He remembered times he had with Stormpelt. How Stormpelt would teach him fighting and hunting moves and bring him along on deputy duties. He remembered

sleeping next to Stormpelt, feeling safe and protected. He felt himself slipping away from reality, into the comfort of his head. Lionpaw's voices faded from echoes into something he couldn't hear.

"Heartkit!?" cried Lionpaw, panicking slightly. Heartkit was with Stormpelt and Brightheart. They were all sharing tongues and Heartkit was rolling between them, happy. They were a family, like they were supposed to be. Three of them, together, Heartkit felt whole again. No more holes.

"Heartkit! Heartkit! Please answer," Lionpaw said panicking, licking Heartkit furiously. Heartkit stayed still. He was in a better place, stuck in his mind of imagination. He wanted to stay there forever.

"Eagleflight!" yelled Lionpaw. "Heartkit won't respond!" Eagleflight was in the den in a second.

"Heartkit!" he said. He licked Heartkit then checked his heartbeat. "He's still alive. He's stuck in his head. Go get some Feverfew, Thyme and when he wakes up he'll need poppy-seeds." Lionpaw nodded and raced out. Heartkit was left shivering next to Eagleflight who tried everything. Heartkit was in his happy bubble. With both of his parents, he played around in a field of green, chasing a butterfly. A small river trickled next to the field. Stormpelt and Brightheart watched him, sharing a sparrow. The sun warmed his pelt and birds sung. Heartkit suddenly smelt something. Something familiar. The scent he grew up with. The one who was fierce but he still somehow felt slightly attached to and had gotten used to. His thoughts of both his parents together in a sunny field were ripped away. His head was muddled. Thoughts of Stormpelt dying. He writhed away. Thoughts of Firpaw. Thoughts of his parents, together. Everything was jumbled. Then a voice, clear in his head rang out. "Heartkit, wake up this instance!" Heartkit felt himself being pulled back to reality. He felt two cats beside him. He remembered Stormpelt. Stormpelt was dead. He wanted to go back into his head but the other cats spoke once more.

"Heartkit, wake up," the voice was smooth and slightly commanding. Heartkit squirmed. The voice wasn't letting him back

into his thoughts. Then a paw prodded him and his eyes opened, blinking. Sandwing stood over him, her eyes watching him intently.

"He's awake!" cried Eagleflight. Lionpaw burst into the nursery. "Lionpaw, feed him the thyme."

"Heartkit, eat the thyme," said Sandwing. She sat next to Heartkit and fed him the thyme Lionpaw passed to her. Eagleflight nodded and slipped out of the nursery. Heartkit ate numbly. He was clouded with sadness but he didn't feel like getting stuck in his head anymore.

"You feeling alright?" inquired Lionpaw gently. Heartkit managed a weak shrug. Sandwing nodded then turned to walk out. Lionpaw frowned.

"Where are you going?" he asked. "Didn't you nurse Heartkit for most of his life? Shouldn't you stay with him? He needs you right now." Sandwing looked thoughtful.

"She's not my kit, I'm going to see my kits," she said matter of factly and walked out. "I did what I could." Lionpaw bristled at her attitude but then changed his attention to Heartkit and soothing him. He slept next to Heartkit, keeping him warm and reassured.

# Ch. 23

Heartkit awoke with Lionpaw curled up around him, warming him. He blinked a few times, wary to have to face life.

"You feeling ok Heartkit?" asked Lionpaw.

"Mmm," mumbled Heartkiit.

"Are you thirsty?" inquired Lionpaw. Heartkit felt like his whole body was too heavy to move. "I'll get you some wet moss. There was some shuffling from the entrance and Firpaw poked his head in. His eyes skimmed onto Heartkit's small body then at Lionpaw.

"Eagleflight is asking for you," he told Lionpaw. "He wants to know if Heartkit is ok and he wants you to feed him seeds or something." Lionpaw nodded. Firpaw beckoned his brother out of the den and he slipped out. Lionpaw got up and followed his brother.

"I'll be back," Lionpaw told Heartkit. He slipped into the clearing. The sun warmed his pelt and he shook himself, feeling suddenly brighter. He sighed, how could he be feeling that when one of his Clanmates was sick. He was the apprentice medicine cat, he should be healing sick cats. He quickly raced to Eagleflight's den. Shadefern was getting Eagleflight to wrap a wound with a cobweb. Eagleflight looked up and nodded to Lionpaw.

"Heartkit needs a few more poppy seeds. I need you here. There are  few more cats who need fresh cobwebs and maybe a few herbs. Flamefrost, Featherflame and Sorrelclaw would be happy to stay with Heartkit," said Eagleflight.

"Yeah sure," nodded Lionpaw. He wanted to stay with Heartkit till he got better. "Who should I check up first?" He searched a pile of herbs till he found a few poppy seeds then took some wet moss.

"Roselight and Pinestar. Pinestar is refusing my help but hopefully he'llbe more lenient with you," Eagleflight instructed. Lionpaw nodded and trotted out with the poppy seeds clamped in his mouth. He found Flamefeather and touched his tail to hers.

"Lionpaw!" she gasped. "Is Heartkit alright?" Lionpaw nodded then motioned for her to follow him. They entered the dark den and Featherflame crouched next Heartkit. Lionpaw dropped the poppy seeds at Heartkit's feet.

"Here Heartkit," mumbled Lionpaw, he placed the wet moss in front of him. Heartkit barely moved. Featherflame looked nervously. "Come on, you need to drink." Weakly, Heartkit took a sip of water from the wet moss. Soon he drank quickly and soon he relaxed, feeling much better.

"Heartkit," whispered Flamefeather. She curled around him and licked him lovingly. "He's going to be alright?" Flamefeather gazed at Lionpaw with hope.

"Yes, you just need to feed him some poppy seeds if he gets too distant or starts to shake, if anything out of your control happens, call me," Lionpaw instructed then quickly added, "or Eagleflight." Featherflame smiled warmly. Lionpaw would become a great medicine cat. He cared for his Clanmates deeply and he was smart and kind.

"Of course, I'll call you," she nodded to Lionpaw. He beamed brightly, whispered an encouraging word into Heartkit's ear then trotted out of the den. Heartkit felt numb, with Featherflame curled up next to him. It hurt him to think about her or Flamefrost and Sorrelclaw. They were the cats who had given him their word. A promise to give their life for their father's. To fight together. But he still died along with Littlestorm.

"Please go," whispered Heartkit harshly. Featherflame frowned sadly.

"Heartkit, you'll be alone," she said.

"You're not my mother. You didn't nurse me like

Sandwing. Only she should be here, and she doesn't want to," Heartkit replied. He shuffled away from Featherflame. Sighing and hurt, Featherflame retreated. She headed to find Sandwing straight away. She found her talking to Clawpelt.

"Sandwing," said Featherflame. Sandwing turned to Featherflame.

"Yeah?" she asked.

"What are you doing? Heartkit needs you right now. You're the only parent he has," Featherflame said.

"I am not his mother," said Sandwing harshly and firmly. Featherflame was taken aback.

"but you nursed him. And he needs you," stammered Featherflame.

"I am not his mother!" hissed Sandwing. She turned away. "I only nursed him because I had to."

"So? Don't you feel anything for him? He is your Clanmate after all!" said Featherflame exasperated.

"I never wanted kits," said Sandwing. "Leave me alone."

"Stormpelt just died. Our faithful deputy and you don't want to do this one thing for him? For his memory?" growled Featherflame.

"Fine," snapped Sandwing. She looked down sadly. "I'll do it for him..." She padded away, without looking at Clawpelt or Featherflame. She hesitated outside of the nursery then slipped in. The dark den filled her with memories of pain. Memories. Too many. It was dark, warm and calm. She sat next to Heartkit and licked him softly. His fur was matted together in sweat.

"Sandwing?" he mumbled.

"Yes it's me," Sandwing told him trying to keep the coldness out of her voice.

"Why did you come?" he asked. Sandwing pondered about telling him that Featherflame had forced her but then decided against it. She was doing this for Stormpelt. Stormpelt... She sighed, her eyes shimmered with tears.

"I er, I mean *you* needed me," Sandwing managed to utter.

"Thanks," mumbled Heartkit, smiling slightly. Sandwing wad the only mother he knew. Sandwing rested her head on her paws and closed her eyes. For the first time in a moon, Heartkit fell asleep next to Sandwing, not feeling as depressed.

# Ch. 24

Heartkit awoke to Sandwing shuffling uncomfortably.

"Here," she said, pushing a poppy seed towards him. Heartkit gobbled it up quickly. "Are you feeling better now?" Heartkit shrugged. Lionpaw ducked into the nursery. He smiled broadly when he saw Heartkit.

"Hey," he beamed. "How are you doing?"

"Ok, said Heartkit.

"You need to eat, you know," said Lionpaw. "What would you like? I'll bring it in. But if you have enough energy, it'll be good for you to go out." Heartkit nodded and slowly got up to his feet. Sandwing sprung to her feet and brushed past Lionpaw.

"He's feeling better now so I'll go," she said and disappeared. Lionpaw frowned but led Heartkit out. The sunlight warmed Heartkit's pelt and gave him a warm tingling feeling. Cindertail spotted Heartkit and smiled.

"Hey Heartkit! Are you feeling better?" she asked. Heartkit shrugged. Lionpaw led him to the foodpile.

"Your pick," Lionpaw said. Heartkit took a small sparrow and he and Lionpaw trotted to the side to eat in the shade. Heartkit took in the fresh air outside and lay comfortably on the ground. He realised how much he hated being trapped in the dark nursery. There was no light and it was stuffy. He shivered at the thought of going back in alone. He took small bites of the food, unsure. But soon, he was eating quickly. Lionpaw smiled.

"Hey, don't eat too quick," Lionpaw said though he was happy to see Heartkit finally eating.

"It's so good," mumbled Heartkit through mouthfuls.

"You're going to be ok...," whispered Lionpaw.

# Ch. 25

Heartkit hesitated. The stars above sparkled brightly and the moon glowed comfortingly. He didn't want to be cut away from the night sky. Looking around the almost deserted clearing, Heartkit quickly trotted to the side of the nursery and crawled under a bramble tree. He rested on the ground and looked up. The leaves covered him but let light seep through. He looked through at the stars. There was some rustling then Cindertail crawled next to Heartkit.

"Are you not going to sleep?" asked Cindertail. "It's getting late."

"I prefer it out here," explained Heartkit. Cindertail nodded.

"You know, one of those stars is Stormpelt. He's watching over you," Cindertail said.

"Really?" meowed Heartkit.

"Yeah, all these stars are cats from Starclan, wathing over us," murmured Cindertail. Heartkit looked up and smiled blissfully. Stormpelt was one of those stars, glittering above him, watching him. Smiling. And another was Brightheart. He spotted two stars, close together, shining brighter than the others. He felt his heart flutter. A feeling of love and calmness settled on Heartkit. He knew those were his parents, together at last. Stormpelt wasn't sad anymore, he was reunited with Brightheart once more.

"Goodnight then Heartkit," wished Cindertail. "I'm going to do the patrols. Are you sure I shouldn't get Flamefrost or someone else to sleep with you in the nursery?" Heartkit shook his head and Cindertail slipped away. Flamefrost, Featherflame and Sorrelclaw had decided they didn't want to be sleeping in the nursery with the parentless kit since he had gotten better. He sighed but then looked back up. The stars were still there, shining.

# Ch. 26

Heartkit raced towards the medicine den. Lionpaw was inside, sorting herbs.

"It's leaf-fall!" cried Heartkit. It had been a moon since Stormpelt's death.

"I know," sighed Lionpaw. "All our herbs will be harder to find and grow."

"It's awesome, after leaf-fall, it'll be leaf-bare which means snow!" squealed Heartkit. Lionpaw chuckled.

"You might not like leaf-bare when you realised how cold it's going to be," said Lionpaw then added, "not to mention all the diseases. I need to start stocking on catmint and tansy."

"Where's Eagleflight?" asked Heartkit.

"He went out on a walk. He need some exercise too," explained Lionpaw.

"Will he become an elder soon?" inquired Heartkit.

"I still have many moons in me," came a voice. Heartkit spun around to see the big Shadowclan medicine cat. He certainly didn't look old but not young either.

"Oh Eagleflight!" exclaimed Lionpaw. "Our stock on tansy and catmint are extremely low and you know the season coming up, we're going to need to restock." Eagleflight nodded thoughtfully.

"Don't worry Heartkit," Eagleflight nodded to Heartkit. "I've still got a lot of moons left in me. Which reminds me, how old are you now?"

"Six moons!" squealed Heartkit. "I'm going to become an apprentice! Do you think Pinestar forgot? Should I go remind him?"

Eagleflight chuckled.

"I already talked to him," Eagleflight assured to Heartkit then winked at Lionpaw. "It's going to be a special day for both of you." Lionpaw frowned, not knowing what Eagleflight was talking about. Heartkit stay in the medicine den the whole day, accompanying Lionpaw, practicing his fighting moves. He seemed to spend most of his time there. Lionpaw was Heartkit's new best friend. Firpaw entered the den. His fur ruffled, seeming distracted.

"Lionpaw," he said, nodding to his brother. Lionpaw trotted over to his brother, beaming, he sniffed.

"I smell blood," frowned Lionpaw.

"Not mine, probably the rats. We went to the Carionplace," explained Firpaw with a shudder. "The rats were giant. But I managed to kill a few." LIonpaw nodded. He noticed Firpaw limping slightly.

"What's with your paw?" he asked.

"I have a thorn. It's fine but Skytail said I needed to get it out," he growled. Heartkit watched, head tilted. Skytail was Firpaw's new mentor and Heartkit could see clearly he hated her.

"Come on, show me your paw," instructed Lionpaw. Firpaw extended his front paw and Lionpaw pinched it then delicately took a thorn out with his teeth.

"Thanks," nodded Firpaw. He trotted out. Lionpaw turned to Heartkit.

"Aren't you hungry?" he asked.

"Sorta," nodded Heartkit. Lionpaw smiled.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get something to eat." Heartkit sometimes forgot Lionpaw was still an apprentice, he always acted much older, like an experienced cat.

"Can we share a mouse?" asked Heartkit. Lionpaw

nodded. Heartkit picked a fat mouse and trotted back into the medicine den with Lionpaw behind him. They shared the mouse as light filtered through.

"You're going to become an apprentice soon," smiled Lionpaw. "Are you excited?"

"Of course!" cried Heartkit.

"You're going to be a great warrior," grinned Lionpaw. He took a last gulp of the mouse just as Pinestar called a Clan meeting. Feeling excited, Heartkit pounded out and watched as Pinestar stood at the Tall Stump. Lionpaw and Eagleflight joined him.

"Heartkit please, step forward," said Pinestar. Heartkit hesitated but Eagleflight nudged him forward. Heartkit tripped and stumbled towards the Tall Stump, conscious of his Clanmates eyes on him. He felt himself burning with embarrassment as he scrambled onto the Tall Stump. Pinestar smiled at him warmly, his eyes looking down at the small cat. Stormpelt's kit.

"Heartkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Heartpaw. I will be your mentor and I will pass down everything I know to you to make you a loyal, noble and brave Shadowclan warrior," announced Pinestar. Heartkit looked up at Pinestar, shocked. His jaw hung open. Pinestar smiled warmly and touched noses with the stunned new apprentice.

"Heartpaw!" Lionpaw was the first to yell out Heartpaw's name which shook the rest of the cats out of their stunned looks.

"Heartpaw! Heartpaw!" hollered all cats. Heartpaw puffed out his chest. He was an apprentice. But not only that, he was the leader's apprentice. He smiled broadly and jumped down. Lionpaw was first to congratulate him.

"Heartpaw!" he grinned. "You're going to be a great warrior." Each cat came up to Heartpaw to congratulate him.

Firpaw watched from a distance then slipped out of camp. Eagleflight came up beside Lionpaw.

"Come, I have more news," he said. "You're going to become a medicine cat."

"What you mean, as an apprentice?" stammered Lionpaw.

"No, we're meeting the other medicine cats today. It'll be your medicine cat ceremony," said Eagleflight. Lionpaw's jaw hung open. Pinestar joined them.

"I've already asked Pinestar," Eagleflight nodded to Pinestar. "Even if you have not reached the age, I know you have learnt everything. You are responsible and kind. And I may have moons left in me but they won't all be spent as a medicine cat. I will retire in a few moons." Lionpaw stood there, eyes bulging, mouth opening and closing.

"But but but," he stammered. "I don't know. It's great but I don't want you to leave." Eagleflight smiled kindly.

"Come on Heartpaw, I'm going to show you the territory," interrupted Pinestar then bowed his head to Lionpaw. "Today, you will become Shadowclan's new medicine cat." Pinestar slipped away with Heartpaw on his heels. Heartpaw felt his heart leap excitedly. He was finally going out of the camp. His paws tingled and his body seemed light as he slipped into the bracken tunnel. His senses sharpened. He was going out! His sense of smell sharpened, so many new smells. He crawled to the end of the tunnel and stepped out of camp.

# Ch. 27

Heartpaw trotted after Pinestar. He took in everything. The dark trees and the ground covered in dead grass. The chirp of birds. The strong breeze. The smells. The sounds. The scents. The sights. They went deeper and deeper into the forest.

"Heartpaw, there is a reason I chose to mentor you," Pinestar said finally. "Now come, let me show you territory." Pinestar went into a long speech about landmarks in the territory, they went to Thunderclan border and Windclan border. Windclan's scent was like the moor which stretched out. It smelt like wind, taking out a faint scent of everything as wind goes everywhere, sweeping around the world. The scent of Windclan mingled in Heartpaw's nose, making him want to sneeze.

"I know the smell is unpleasant," said Pinestar. "But to them, we smell bad too." Heartpaw didn't think it unpleasant though. He found it exhilarating and exciting. Thunderclan's scent was strong and seemed to seep into Heartpaw's nose strongly. He cringed.

"Thunderclan's scent is strong," agreed Pinestar. "This is the Thunderpath." Heartpaw looked at a long path with stretched out either side of them, like a straight, putrid smelling river. It was vast and dark coloured. He crinkled his nose.

"You don't want to cross it," said Pinestar sternly. "We will not cross it, hopefully we never will need to cross it ever again." Heartpaw wondered if Pinestar was thinking about the great battle with Thudnerclan. Heartpaw had never asked about the battle. He had never needed to know more. Stormpelt and Littlestorm had died. Shadowclan had still won. That was all he needed to know. They went through the whole territory until Heartpaw's pads hurt and throbbed. He hadn't walked this far in...., well ever. He had never imagined Shadowclan like this. He knew it was big so it's big borders didn't surprise him how far it stretched but he hadn't expected to see so many things. Tired, they finally went back to

camp.

"You can go see those pads with Lionpaw and Eagleflight when they come back," Pinestar said. "Although Lionpaw probably won't be Lionpaw anymore." Heartpaw nodded.

"You're sleeping in the apprentice den tonight, with the other apprentices. Tomorrow, wake at sunrise," Pinestar said. "Goodnight and good work Heartpaw." Heartpaw smiled and nodded as Pinestar walked away. He was bouncing with excitement when he saw Lionpaw and Eagleflight duck into camp. He ran over to Lionpaw.

"Lionpaw! It was so fun! I never knew there was going to be so much to see!" cried Heartpaw.

"It's not Lionpaw anymore," corrected Lionpaw, "it's Lionbreeze." Heartpaw stopped in his tracks and his jaw hung open.

"You're a medicine cat!" squealed Heartpaw. Lionbreeze nodded proudly.

"Yes," agreed Eagleflight, his eyes sparkling with pride. Cindertail trotted over to them.

"Lionbreeze is a medicine cat!" cried Heartpaw. Cindertail gasped then congratulated Lionbreeze quickly.

"Pinestar!" she called. Eagleflight touched his tail to her shoulder.

"I'll get her. I think it should be my duty, to tell the Clan," said Eagleflight.

"Right," Cindertail nodded apologetically.

"No problem," said Eagleflight. "You're doing great as a deputy." Cindertail nodded solemnly and walked quickly away. "I'm going to see Pinestar." Lionebreeze nodded and asked Heartpaw about his day.

"We went around the *whole* territory," exclaimed Heartpaw.

"Do your pads hurt?" inquired Lionbreeze. Heartpaw shrugged. He wanted to seem strong.

"They're fine," he assured Lionbreeze.

"Are you sure? I can treat it," Lionbreeze pressed. Heartpaw nodded convincingly. Heartpaw told Lionbreeze about the whole walk, only stopping to take a few breaths. He ranted on and on excitedly.

# Ch. 28

Heartpaw trotted into the apprentice den. The ground was soft soil and there were six moss beds. Smelling a few, he recognised which ones were Firpaw's, Honeypaw's and Spottedpaw's. He took the one nearest to the entrance of the den and curled up into his new bed. Spottedpaw a black and white cat padded in.

"Hey," said Heartpaw, looking up. Spottedpaw harrumphed in response and curled up into her nest. "I'm Heartpaw."

"I know," grumbled Spottedpaw.

"So, um, how long have you been an apprentice?" asked Heartpaw.

"I'm going to become a warrior soon," mumbled Spottedpaw.

"Right," smiled Heartpaw. "So who's your mentor?"

"You ask a lot of questions," she said through gritted teeth. "My mentor is Brichstep." Heartpaw nodded.

"So...?" Heartpaw trailed off.

"I'm going to sleep," replied Spottedpaw. Firpaw and Honeypaw entered, talking together animatedly.

"I can't believe Lionbreeze is a medicine cat before us!" said Firpaw.

"But I'm really happy for him," said Honeypaw.

"Yeah, of course, but I wish we could become warriors early," sighed Firpaw. He spotted Heartpaw. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm an apprentice. Or have you forgotten?" answered

Heartpaw.

"Shouldn't you be in the nursery, alone?" Firpaw grunted. Honeypaw frowned.

"You don't have to be so mean you know, Stormpelt died," Honeypaw told her brother. Heartpaw gritted his teeth at the mention of his father.

"So? He gave up being a deputy," growled Firpaw and stalked to his nest.

"He was a brave warrior," Honeypaw countered.

"Whatever," growled Firpaw. Heartpaw growled under his breath and lashed his tail angrily.

"Don't ever talk about Stormpelt badly ever again!" he snapped.

"What you gonna do?" Firpaw taunted.

"Quit acting like a jerk Firpaw," warned Honeypaw, brushing her tail across Heartpaw's mouth. Firpaw rolled his eyes and curled into a ball. Heartpaw faced the other way, bristling. He wanted to scratch Firpaw's eyes out. What had he turned into? He used to be a promising warrior. Stormpelt used to be so proud of him. But now... He was just a bitter bully.

# Ch. 29

Heartpaw blinked his eyes open. The sun shone through his eyelids. Yawning, Heartpaw shifted in his nest. Too early. He heard some shuffling then he heard pawsteps. He turned to see Spottedpaw trudging out of the den. He frowned. Why would anyone wake up that early? With a grumble Heartpaw realised the sun had almost risen. He grumpily scrambled to his feet. Yawning widely, Heartpaw slumped out of the den. Maybe being an apprentice wasn't all that good. When he spotted Pinestar, his beige pelt glowing in the sun, some of his fur white, he felt a surge of strength. With a grin, he trotted to his mentor. Pinestar was talking to Clawpelt and Cindertail.

"Good morning Heartpaw," smiled Pinestar. "Woke up on time. That's good, not many apprentices do that." Skytail, looking grumpy agreed.

"Yep, Firpaw can't get up before sunrise," she growled angrily. Pinestar chuckled.

"I'll wake him up," chirped a voice. A happy, sweet voice. Heartpaw turned to see Honeypaw, her sparkling green eyes gazing at him. "He's really grumpy in the mornings, only Lionpaw or I can get him up. He wasn't like this when he was a kit." She flashed a sympathetic smile at Heartpaw then padded back to the apprentice den.

"Right then," Pinestar said. "Let's get going." He flicked his tail, nodded to Cindertail and exited the camp with Heartpaw on his tail. They walked in the forest, feeling the cool morning breeze and listening to the bird's song.

"Today, I'm going to teach you to hunt," Pinestar said. As they went deeper into the territory. The air was cold and crisp and made Heartpaw feel slightly out of his comfort zone but it helped make his senses sharp. "As you must know, it is the apprentices' duty to hunt of the elders so the sooner you learn to hunt, the

sooner you'll be able to feed the elders." They stopped in a clearing.

"First, tell me what you smell," Pinestar instructed. "Take your times. Smell carefully." Heartpaw took a deep breath. He smelt the fresh cool air. He smelt the trees and the leaves. He tried to figure up the mingled smells. Then, he smelt bird, it was like a sharp scent. He pricked his ears. He could hear birds chirping everywhere but he could only scent one.

"I smell a bird," reported Heartpaw.

"What else? Really concentrate. Your nose is stronger than you think," Pinestar urged. Heartpaw tried harder. He smelt the dead grass and the fallen leaves, he smelt mouse. And he heard mouse.

"Mouse," he said.

"Good," Pinestar said. "And it'll be gone soon, so, let's see what you've got. Go get it." Heartpaw crouched and slowly crawled forward. His stomach low, his whiskers twitching. He kept his tail low, for balance. He crept forward, careful where he was stepping. His movements were slow and agile. He inched forward, towards a tree. He crossed a large root protruding from the ground. His ears pricked forward. He heard the mouse. He heard its small paws, shuffling the leaves. He turned around the corner of the tree. The mouse was there. Oblivious. Heartpaw sprang forward. His jump was pumped with power. He jumped high and just as he was about to land, the mouse scuttled away. He huffed in annoyance.

"Too high," said Pinestar. Heartpaw sighed and nodded. This was going to be a long day.

# Ch. 30

Heartpaw bunched up his muscles and leapt. His leap was swift and low. He sunk his claws into the squirming vole then snapped its neck. The noise of the animal's neck breaking still made Heartpaw feel slightly sick but he was getting used to this.

"Good," praised Pinestar, appearing from behind a pine tree. "You've hunted well. You can go bring your prey to the elders. As you now know how to hunt, you will be able to hunt for the elders everyday." Heartpaw nodded enthusiastically then dug out the rest of his catch. He had caught another mouse after he had missed his first one and a shrew and of course, the vole. He took the three pieces of prey in his mouse and they padded back to camp. Heartpaw felt a swell of pride as Goldenheart, Daisyfoot, Oakfall and Honeypaw emerged from the camp entrance and praised Heartpaw.

"Great catch Heartpaw!" beamed Honeypaw. "On my first hunt, I missed like five mice." Heartpaw giggled and smiled.

"That's very impressive," agreed Oakfall then he turned to Pinestar. "We're going to border patrol." Heartpaw and Pinestar slipped into camp and a few cats congratulated Heartpaw.

"Right, tomorrow, we start at the same time," Pinestar said. "Go get some food to the elders and then you need to eat as well. And make sure to get some rest." Heartpaw nodded and trotted to the elder's den. Cindertail was checking the food pile and smiled when Heartpaw passed her.

"Thank goodness one of the apprentices is doing a good job feeding the elders," she huffed. "Spottedpaw thinks she's too old. Firpaw is never in the mood and Honeypaw..., she just never gets to it. I need to talk to them about that." Heartpaw nodded, his mouth full. He trotted to the elder's den. They were sunning and murmuring to themselves. Heartpaw dropped the food in front of Whitecloud.

"Thank you," she purred. She picked the shrew.

"Ah, finally, an apprentice gives us food," sighed Crowtail.

"We thought we would have to hunt ourselves," agreed Riverclaw angrily, taking a bite out of the shrew.

"Don't worry, I'll hunt for you guys everyday," assured Heartpaw. He smiled and padded off. Before he could go to the apprentice den, he realised how hungry he was. He backtracked to the fresh kill pile and took a small shrew. After eating quickly and hungrily, Heartpaw, exhausted and numb, padded slowly back to the apprentice den.

"I had my final assessment today," came Spottedpaw's voice. "Hopefully Pinestar will make me a warrior so tonight at the Gathering, all the cats will know."

"I bet Pinestar will want Heartpaw to go to the Gathering," hissed a voice. Firpaw. "I should have gotten Pinestar as a mentor. I had the deputy as a mentor! Too bad Stormpelt was so mouse brained." Heartpaw growled and slipped into the den. He hissed angrily, his fur bristling.

"Say that again!" he threatened. Firpaw and Spottedpaw turned, surprised. Firpaw's mouth turned up into a smile. He grinned then snarled.

"Watcha gonna do?" he spat.

"Don't talk about Stormpelt like that...," growled Heartpaw.

"Or what?" snapped Firpaw. "You gonna maul me with those tiny claws?" Heartpaw growled and sprang. Firpaw was knocked to the ground but was bigger and over turned Heartpaw. Heartpaw felt pain shoot through his sides as Firpaw's claws dug in. Thrashing angrily, Heartpaw bit into Firpaw's paw and he yelped and let go. They faced each other, Firpaw had fur missing on his tail and Heartpaw was bleeding on his side. Heartpaw spat out the chunk of Firpaw's fur from his mouth and snarled. Firpaw sprang

and knocked Heartpaw over. He landed on his back with a grunt and a thud. Angrily, he threw Firpaw off but Firpaw clawed his side. Heartpaw managed to bite Firpaw's ear and Firpaw squeaked and jumped back. Lashing his tail, Firpaw sprang and pinned Heartpaw down forcefully.

"You're still a kit to me," he spat in Heartpaw's face. "You thought you could beat me?" Spottedpaw watched, uninterested. Heartpaw panted, his chest heaved in and out. Firpaw was stopping him from breathing properly and his sides burnt. He tried to roll away but Firpaw was too strong.

"Firpaw!" came a sharp voice. Firpaw snapped his head back to see Skytail. He snarled angrily but leapt off Heartpaw. Heartpaw rolled to his feet, his fur messy.

"What do you think you're doing?" snapped Skytail, eyeing the two apprentices. "I'm going to talk to your mentor Heartpaw. And you Firpaw, you should have known better, you've been an apprentice longer. Go to the medicine den. Both of you. I'm fetching your mentor Heartpaw. We are going to have a long talk." Her eyes bore into Firpaw angrily and she stalked off. Firpaw growled at Heartpaw but they both slunk to the medicine den.

"If we get in trouble, I'll claw your ears off," hissed Firpaw. Lionbreeze appeared. He didn't look amused.

"What have you done now, brother?" the young cat sighed. Heartpaw felt slightly happier in Lionbreeze's company. "You alright Heartpaw?" Heartpaw shrugged and nodded. Lionbreeze brought them into the den and checked Firpaw's wounds.

"What did you do?" he asked.

"I beat Heartpaw," smirked Firpaw. Lionbreeze wasn't amused.

"What were you thinking?! You don't do that!" growled Lionbreeze.

"So? You're not my mother," snapped back Firpaw.

"I'm your brother and I'm a fully fledged medicine cat," Lionbreeze said. "Your wounds aren't too bad. I'll give you both some dock. Some for your ear Firpaw and some for your scratches Heartpaw." He applied dock on Heartpaw's scratched who bit his tongue to not whimper in pain. He then put some on Firpaw's ear. Eagleflight slipped into the den. He eyed the apprentices unapprovingly then went to his corner to sort some herbs.

"Look, Pinestar and Skytail are coming," said Lionbreeze, nodding to the approaching warriors. Pinestar looked upset and Skytail bristled angrily. They entered the medicine den. Heartpaw looked away, ashamed but Firpaw didn't seem to care.

"What happened?" demanded Pinestar. "Why did you fight?"

"I'm sorry Pinestar," apologised Heartpaw.

"It was him," snapped Firpaw, his eyes dug into Heartpaw. "He started it." Pinestar frowned but Skytail looked exasperated.

"Don't even try to lie Firpaw, I'm your mentor, I should know by now when you're lying," snapped Skytail.

"It wasn't his fault," Heartpaw put in. "He was talking about Stormpelt and I got mad and it sorta happened."

"Stormpelt?" Pinestar frowned. His eyes turned to Firpaw angrily. "What did you say about him?"

"Nothing," protested Firpaw, giving Heartpaw a withering look.

"Heartpaw?" questioned Pinestar.

"He said Stormpelt was mouse brained," Heartpaw said, not daring to look Firpaw in the eye.

"Firpaw, is this true," questioned Pinestar, trying to keep his cool.

"Yeah but so what?" snapped Firpaw.

"How dare you speak of our former deputy like that? Our Clanmate. A brave and loyal cat?" roared Pinestar. He turned to Skytail angrily. "Firpaw is grounded for a moon. He isn't allowed to leave camp. If his training get behind, too bad, he'll become a warrior later than other apprentices. Firpaw, you have no right to talk about a loyal cat that way! You cannot dishonour a cat in Starclan." Firpaw's eyes went wide.

"One moon!" he cried. He lashed his tail angrily. "That's not fair." Skytail sighed.

"Pinestar, Firpaw would be very behind in his learning," agreed Skytail.

"Too bad, you heard me," snapped Pinestar. His eyes dug into Heartpaw.

"A moon is slightly too harsh," Skytail pressed. "How about half a moon, he'll stay in camp, I'll teach him battle moves here but the rest of the time, he'll pick ticks off elders." Pinestar snapped out of his trance.

"Fine," he said finally. Then he turned to Heartpaw. "Don't think you're not going to be punished either. Whenever you have free time, you are to pick ticks off the elder's pelt and I will tell Honeypaw and Spottedpaw not to hunt, you will take care of that. And you will do all those things on top of your trainings. I won't be cutting your trainings short." Heartpaw didn't make a noise. He deserved the punishment. Firpaw huffed angrily.

"That's not fair. We both fought!" he complained.

"You're an older apprentice. You should have known better. And you dishonoured a Shadowclan's name," spat Pinestar. His fur was ruffled. "Now both of you, go back to your dens, the punishment starts tomorrow."

# Ch. 31

Pinestar called Spottedpaw up. Heartpaw watched intently. He knew Spottedpaw was becoming a warrior.

"I, Pinestar, leader of Shadowclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn. Spottedpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Pinestar demanded. Spottedpaw lift her chin up and puffed out her chest fur.

"I do," she said loudly.

"Then by the powers of Starclan, I give you your warrior name. Spottedpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Spottedwhisker. Starclan honours your dedication and Spirit," Pinestar said. "We welcome you as a full warrior of Shadowclan."

"Spottedwhisker!" yelled the Clan. Heartpaw joined in with the happy cries. He trotted over to Spottedwhisker.

"Good job!" he cried. Birchstep came up to congratulate his old apprentice.

"Tonight, there is a Gathering," Pinestar said, calling everyone's attention. Heartpaw spotted Firpaw stalking away, knowing he wasn't going. "I will go, with Cindertail, Eagleflight and Lionbreeze of course and I want Spottedwhisker, Birchstep, Rabbitleap, Deerdapple, Duskblaze, Thislenose, Riverclaw, Foxwhisker and Honeypaw. If any of you wish to come, I will let two other cats come as well." Heartpaw slunk into the apprentice den. He had missed his first chance at going to the Gathering. He sighed and slumped into his nest. Honeypaw shot into the apprentice den.

"What happened today?" she asked. Firpaw looked up then

glared at Heartpaw. He opened his mouth to say something but Honeypaw continued with a rant, "I'm going to the Gathering tonight. I can't wait. I haven't gone in a while. Plus, I'll get to see those pesky Thunderclan and I'll be able to brag about our attack on them. They haven't crossed the border since!" Firpaw grumbled and covered his face with his paw. Heartpaw listened to Honeypaw intently. She saw his gaze fixed on her and beamed.

"I'm so sad you can't come," she huffed. "But maybe next time." Then she waltzed out.

# Ch. 32

Heartpaw rolled onto his back and pricked his ears. Crickets chirped and owls hooted. The air was cool. Heartpaw slowly got up and walked out of the apprentice den. Stars sparkled in the sky and a moon shone brightly above. He sighed, the cats who had gone to the Gathering had arrived long ago and Honeypaw was long since snoring but Heartpaw hadn't been able to sleep. Yawning, he padded quietly out of camp. The night was still but yet alive. He trotted through the forest, the cold breeze on his face. Owl flew above him, quick and deadly. Their talons stretched out for mice. Too bad, thought Heartpaw, I want mice too. He crouched. He smelt something. Slowly, he edged forward. There, underneath a dark bush, hidden in the shadows was a mouse. Heartpaw bunched up his muscles and got ready for the jump. Suddenly, something swooped in from above and the bush shook. Heartpaw jumped back and before he knew what was happening, a large owl flew back up in the sky, the mouse clutched in its claws. Heartpaw snarled and stumbled away. Hunting at night made his senses sharper and his mind clearer. He felt himself enjoying it.

The sun was slowly rising and the owls had disappeared. Birds were starting to sing songs and flapping around the trees. Heartpaw emerged from under a bush, where he had kept all the prey he had caught. In his mouth hung three mice and a vole. He trotted back to camp, feeling the first sun rays on his pelt. He slipped into camp where a dawn patrol was talking. Pinestar was amongst them and when he spotted Heartpaw with the prey, he raised his eyebrows but his eyes shone with approval. Heartpaw padded to the elder's den. Riverclaw was awake. He nodded to Heartpaw.

"You are keeping up with your promise," he commented. Heartpaw nodded and dropped the prey in front of them.

"We can't eat all four, take the vole," Riverclaw said.

"Thanks," mumbled Heartpaw who was more tired than hungry.

"Why are you awake so early?" rasped Whitecloud, emerging from the den. "Ooh, food. Why thank you." She took a mouse and dug in.

"Watch it," Heartpaw said. "I won't be able to hunt this afternoon probably so this might be the only food you get. I'll try to hunt more though. Take the vole." He pushed the vole back towards Riverclaw. "I gotta go." Heartpaw trotted back to Pinestar.

"Good, you're ready," he nodded. "And you fed the elders. Come on. Fighting lessons today." Heartpaw followed Pinestar out, not knowing how he was going to stay awake. But as they bounded through the territory, Heartpaw felt more alive than ever.

# Ch. 33

Out of the whole tiring day, the thing Heartpaw hated the most had been picking ticks out of the elders' pelt. And it wasn't the tick picking. It was the fact that he had to do it with Firpaw. Firpaw, having been grounded all day could have done picking the ticks a long time before but he had decided to wait for Heartpaw. So Heartpaw had had to help as his eyes drooped lower. Heartpaw now lay on the ground, resting under the shade of a small tree. Honeypaw joined him.

"How was your day?" she asked.

"Bad," grumbled Heartpaw. She laughed.

"Picking picks of elders suck doesn't it?" she agreed.

"Picking ticks of elders *with* Firpaw sucks," corrected Heartpaw. Honeypaw laughed again, her eyes sparkled with amusement.

"He can be annoying sometimes," agreed Honeypaw. "So how long will you have to do that?"

"I'm not sure, Pinestar never specified. But Firpaw is doing it for half a moon," explained Heartpaw.

"Well that's not too bad," shrugged Honeypaw. "He deserved it." Heartpaw rolled to his side and cocked his head, fixing his amber eyes on Honeypaw. Her light coloured coat and her piercing green eyes made her look beautiful. He couldn't help but stare. She curled her tail around her paws, smiling at his look.

"What's wrong?" she giggled.

"Nothing," mumbled Heartpaw, looking away embarrassed. Her eyes sparkled with amusement.

"You know what, I don't care what Firpaw says, you're nice,"

she said. Heartpaw grinned.

"Really?" he asked.

"Yeah," nodded Honeypaw. Heartpaw smiled, Firpaw would be so mad if he knew his sister was friends with him. He stretched and yawned.

"I'm going to sleep. I'm so tired," he said then yawned to show his point. Honeypaw trotted to his side and followed him into the apprentice den. At the sight of his nest, Heartpaw felt his eyes droop and he collapsed on his nest. He closed his eyes and smiled blissfully. Honeypaw laughed.

"You must be really tired," she pointed out. But Heartpaw was already fast asleep.

# Ch. 34

Heartpaw was finally free of his punishment. Although Firpaw's punishment had lasted only half a moon, Heartpaw's had lasted a whole moon. It was late afternoon as Heartpaw lay, sunning in the camp clearing. Honeypaw joined him.

"Hey," she smiled.

"Hey," he grinned back happily.

"What are you so happy about?" asked Honeypaw.

"Today is my last day of my punishment," grinned Heartpaw.

"Oh no," joked Honeypaw. "That means I have to hunt for the elders once again."

"Yep, all of us do," Heartpaw said.

"Well, thanks for that whole moon of holiday," laughed Honeypaw. She curled her tail around Heartpaw's. Heartpaw gazed at the Tall Stump where Pinestar was talking to Cindertail. Pinestar nodded and jumped onto the Tall Stump. Heartpaw jumped to his feet.

"Do you think they're going to announce who's going to the Gathering?" asked Heartpaw. Honeypaw nodded. "I'm so excited. I hope I get picked."

"Everyone listen up. Tonight is the Gathering. I will be taking Mousewhisker, Darkspeck, Flamefrost, Clawpelt, Sandwing, Raggedscar, Skytail, Firpaw and Heartpaw. If three or two more cats want to go, come and see me," announced Pinestar. Heartpaw leapt up excitedly.

"I'm going to the Gathering!" he squealed. Honeypaw

smiled.

"That's great," she said. Heartpaw bounded away to thank Pinestar. He was talking to Nightcloud.

"I haven't gone in a while," said Nightcloud. Pinestar nodded.

"You can come," he assured. He spotted Heartpaw and smiled.

"Thank you so much," cried Heartpaw. "I'm so happy!"

"You know the rules though," said Pinestar sternly. "You are not to start fights, understood? Or no more Gatherings till you become a warrior." Heartpaw's eyes bulged but he nodded quickly. "Good." Heartpaw trotted away, a happy song flitted in his heart. He would finally see cats from other Clans.

"Heartpaw," Cindertail called. "We are going to Thunderclan border to patrol. Would you like to come?" Heartpaw nodded. Cindertail was joined with Dustbreeze and Dandelionfrost. The four cats slipped out and headed towards Thunderclan territory. The air was cool and the ground littered in orange, red and yellow leaves. Heartpaw sunk into the leaves happily. He scented Thunderclan border and the Thunderpath. He crinkled his nose.

"They have a strong scent," agreed Dustbreeze, seeing Heartpaw's face. Heartpaw bounded to the edge of their territory.

"Can I mark it?" he begged. Cindertail shrugged.

"Of course, it's good practice," she told him. He marked their border then they headed back through the forest.

Heartpaw joined the group of cats. The night was calm with a gentle breeze. Pinestar signalled with his tail and the cats slipped into the dark shadows. They pelted towards the Four Trees. Heartpaw followed his Clanmates, exhilarated. They slipped through the shadows. He felt strangely calm as he slipped into the shadows of the trees and then into the light of the moon. He felt part the unity of the Clan as they ran towards the Four Trees.

Finally, Heartpaw smelt the Thunderpath. It's strong acid scent made him scrunch up his nose. They stopped before the Thunderpath. It seemed eerily scarier at night. Heartpaw shivered at the thought of  Pinestar looked for Heartpaw and beckoned him to his side.

"We are not going to cross the Thunderpath," Pinestar told Heartpaw. Heartpaw frowned. How were they going to get to the Gathering? "There is a tunnel, underneath the Thunderpath. We are not sure Thunderclan know about it. But they probably do. We're going to cross then go into Windclan territory to get to the Fourtrees." Heartpaw nodded. Pinestar then turned around and walked forward to a clump of overgrowing plants. He pushed though and disappeared. Every cat followed. Firpaw snickered at Heartpaw then disappeared into the plants. Skytail waited for Heartpaw to go int. He pushed through, closing his eyes so nothing would go into his eyes. He found himself crawling through a tight dirt tunnel. It was completely dark. Heartpaw felt his heart clamp and shivered with fear. Not because of the dark but because of the feeling of being trapped. He felt slightly comforted by the thought that Firpaw wouldn't see his scared face as he crawled through to the otherside. The Clan continued into Windclan territory. The moor stretched long. The grass was long and probably hid many mice. Heartpaw scanned the moor with awe. It was beautiful. The wind swept around, strong and free in the moor. Nothing stopped it. The long grass danced from side to side. Someone prodded him forward. Heartpaw quickly followed his Clanmates. He spotted the Four Trees. They were big and grand. Bigger than he had imagined. He gaped as they got closer. He spotted the shapes of many cats. Some of them were slim and looked swift and fast. The others had short and sleek fur. He sniffed. He had never smelt them before. They stank of too much water and fish. The strong was strong and wafted towards him even before they got there.

"Riverclan and Windclan are already here," Pinestar told Heartpaw. "Do you remember the leaders, deputies and medicine cats?" Heartpaw thought hard. He recalled Pinestar telling him.

"Thunderclan's leader is Falconstar, the deputy is... Waspnose?" Heartpaw said unsure.

"Yes and their medicine cat is Snowfur. The leader of Windclan is Fawnstar, the deputy is Marshtail and the medicine cat is Addertail," Pinestar continued. "Riverclan's leader is?"

"Ummm, Thornstar. The medicine cat is Frogleap and the deputy...," Heartpaw trailed off. Pinestar smiled. They jumped over a log and entered the clearing.

"Reedpelt," Pinestar said then padded away into the crowd. Heartpaw looked around. His Clanmates mixed with other cats. Heartpaw backed away to the edge. He bumped into another cat. He turned around.

"Sorry," he exclaimed. He stared at a light brown tabby will pale eyes. Heartpaw stared into them, transfixed.

"It's ok," smiled the cat warmly. Heartpaw slipped in next to her, watching the other cats around them.

"I'm Ivypaw," smiled the cat shyly.

"I'm Heartpaw," squeaked Heartpaw. He stared at the beautiful cat next to him. She was slim and had a long thin tail. Her fur was neat and short. "You have really nice fur." Heartpaw quickly regretted his words. Ivypaw laughed.

"Thanks," she said.

"No p-problem," mumbled Heartpaw.

"So you're from Shadowclan?" she asked.

"Yeah," nodded Heartpaw. A few awkward moments of silence passed then Thunderclan arrived. They were big and strong cats. Heartpaw's jaw almost dropped.

"Woah," murmured Ivypaw. "They're- scary."

"I know," agreed Heartpaw. Thunderclan went to greet many cats but nobody approached Ivypaw and Heartpaw.

"I never knew they were this strong. That's why they

always crossed out border. Nothing must scare them," huffed Heartpaw. He didn't like the fact that Thunderclan looked so strong.

"Really?" Ivypaw said. Heartpaw quickly realised what he had said and cringed. "It's the same for us!"

"No way!" cried Heartpaw. "We launched an attack though and now they've stopped crossing our border."

"That was you guys?" exclaimed Ivypaw. "They kept on crossing our borders so we launched an attack as well and they were *so* weak with wounds which had barely healed." Heartpaw smiled at the thought that his Clan had weakened Thunderclan so much. Maybe they weren't so bad after all.

"How long have you been an apprentice?" asked Ivypaw.

"Two moons," said Heartpaw. "You?"

"One," replied Ivypaw. "So this is your second Gathering?"

"Nope," said Heartpaw sheepishly.

"Oh," she laughed. "Did you do something?"

"Yeah got into a fight with this other apprentice. He's so annoying," grumbled Heartpaw at the thought of Firpaw.

"There's this apprentice in Windclan who's so annoying as well. His name is Firepaw. Sooo annoying," Ivypaw said, rolling her eyes. Heartpaw couldn't help but giggled. He suddenly felt himself enjoying the Gathering and relaxing. Ivypaw was funnily easy to talk to.

"It's starting," whispered Ivypaw. Heartpaw watched as the four leaders leapt onto the large boulder and stood before all the Clans. None of Heartpaw's Clan noticed him missing.

"Ivypaw," called a voice.

"It's ok, I'm fine, I'm sitting here," Ivypaw said back to a

brown cat. He nodded and sat back with Windclan.

"Thunderclan," announced Falconstar, her dark pelt puffed out, her muscles rippling under her fur, "is doing great. We have plenty of prey and we have two new, healthy kits from Bumbleheart and Applenose, Beekit and Moosekit." Thunderclan cried out happily. Heartpaw shot a look at Ivypaw who gave him the same look. They both burst out laughing and a big Thunderclan cat glared at them. They quickly shut their mouths, eyes wide. But they couldn't hold in their laughter and soon began to giggle. Riverclan's leader, Thornstar, stepped forward. Her pelt was dark brown, almost black tabby. Her eyes pierced the crowd of cats. She radiated power.

"Riverclan is glad for Thunderclan's new kits. We, as well, have good news. Two of our former apprentices, Moorpelt and Acornheart, have become full warriors of Riverclan," declared Thornstar. Riverclan started calling out the names enthusiastically and the other Clans joined in but not as loud. Then Windclan's leader, Fawnstar stepped forward. His eyes were sharp and yellow. He was sleep and was much smaller than the other leaders but he still radiated calmness and wisdom.

"Windclan is happy for both Thunderclan and Riverclan. Leaf-fall has arrived and we are not running low on food. Our territory runs with prey. Windclan is stronger than ever," declared Fawnstar then he slipped back. Pinestar stepped forward. He was the oldest of all the leaders. His fur was faded, some of it white but his posture showed his position as leader and he stood proud and confident. Heartpaw felt a rush of pride as his Clan leader stepped forward. Everyone would fear Shadowclan."

"Shadowclan is thriving. We have much prey running around our territory and our warriors are strong," said Pinestar. His green eyes held the crowd then he turned around and leapt off the rock. Ivypaw turned to Heartpaw.

"What's your favourite food?" asked Ivypaw seriously.

"I don't know. I like everything," said Heartpaw. "And you?"

"Squirrel. I looove squirrels but we don't get many. I've only had it once and it was the best thing I've ever eaten," said Ivypaw. Heartpaw cocked his head thoughtfully. Ivypaw giggled, "you look cute like that". Heartpaw looked down and flushed with embarrassment.

"I've never really tried squirrel. We get a lot but I mostly stick to mice, voles and shrews," admitted Heartpaw.

"Heartpaw!" called a voice. It was Pinestar.

"Heartpaw, we're going," Pinestar said, approaching. Heartpaw's Clanmates were gathered behind Heartpaw, watching him and Ivypaw.

"Oh sorry," mumbled Heartpaw. Ivypaw smiled brightly.

"It's fine. I'll see you in a moon?" Ivypaw said.

"Sure thing," nodded Heartpaw. "Bye." Ivypaw beamed.

"Bye," she said with a small wink and walked off. Heartpaw bounded to Pinestar, his chest practically bursting. He heard Firpaw snicker behind him. He glanced back and glared at him.

"Got a new Windclan mate?" taunted Firpaw. Pinestar turned back and frowned at Firpaw. Firpaw closed his mouth and returned to Skytail's side.

"Let's go," Pinestar said, leading Shadowclan away. "So you made a new friend?" Heartpaw nodded.

"Yep," he said. "Her name's Ivypaw."

"It's good to know cats from other Clans. But never get attached. Act friendly of course, but don't get attached. You might fight her and then it's either your life or hers," said Pinestar. Heartpaw doubted that. They were friends and he was going to see her in a moon although a small nagging and longing thought in his head wanted to see her again much earlier. She was Windclan for Starclan's sake! He shouldn't *miss* a Windclan cat. But he did. It had been easy talking to her, plus she was funny and not to mention,

gorgeous. Heartpaw returned to camp, his thoughts filled with Ivypaw. He almost bumped into a beaming Honeypaw when he entered the apprentice den.

"Hey! How was it?" she asked excitedly.

"Great," purred Heartpaw. Honeypaw pressed herself to Heartpaw.

"Really?" she gushed. "Who did you meet? Did you see Thunderclan?" Heartpaw nodded. Firpaw slunk past them, growling to his sister.

"I met a she-cat," said Heartpaw.

"Oh. Who?" Honeypaw asked. She watched as Heartpaw curled into his nest.

"Ivypaw. Even her name sounds nice," said Heartpaw.

"Oh looks like somebody has a crush on a Windclan cat!" smirked Firpaw. Honeypaw glared at her brother.

"No he doesn't," she retorted but frowned. She returned to her nest and curled up. Heartpaw fell into a blissful sleep, dreaming about Gatherings where he was the leader, talking at the top of the boulder, grand and strong.

# Ch. 35

A sharp pain flared in Heartpaw's ear. He shot up to his paws. Firpaw jumped back, a glint of amusement in his eyes. Heartpaw growled and bristled.

"What was that for?" he snapped.

"Pinestar is waiting," Firpaw said, his whiskers twitching in amusement. "He asked me to wake you." Heartpaw huffed and slunk out into the clearing. The sun was bright and he blinked angrily. Grumpily, he padded towards the camp entrance. Pinestar stood, waiting with Cindertail by his side. She seemed to be talking animatedly to him but he didn't seem to be listening.

"You're late," Pinestar stated when Heartpaw came to a stop in front of him.

"Yeahsorry," mumbled Heartpaw. Pinestar frowned and led Heartpaw out. Heartpaw trotted after Pinestar, his steps slightly clumsy. Finally, Pinestar halted and Heartpaw crumpled to the ground, tired.

"If you can't wake up after a Gathering, you won't be going anymore," Pinestar growled. Heartpaw's ears pricked. His first thought was "I won't see Ivypaw!". Then he scolded himself for thinking like that. He had never felt like this before.

"I'm sorry," Heartpaw said quickly, suddenly fully awake. "I won't be late again." Pinestar nodded.

"Good. Today, we're going to learn fighting moves. We are going to start with the front paw strike," Pinestar declared. "Right, position yourself like this..." Heartpaw positioned himself like Pinestar. He crouched but not too low and Pinestar told him to put his weight on his hind paws and balance well. When Heartpaw was in a good position, Pinestar striked out, bringing his front paw

down on Heartpaw's head. He crumpled to the ground, dizzy and moaning. Pinestar waited till Heartpaw got up then nodded for him to try. Fuelled by the thought of getting to hit the Clan leader, Heartpaw brought his front paw down at Pinestar but he merely patted Pinestar's head and he didn't move. Heartpaw huffed and Pinestar started going into a long speech about position and strength.

After a gruelling day of training, Heartpaw padded back to camp, tired and aching. He slumped under the shade of a bush. Honeypaw trotted over to his side.

"Tough day?" she asked.

"Mmm," muttered Heartpaw, not looking up.

"Do you want to share something with me?" asked Honeypaw. Heartpaw's stomach grumbled but he didn't want to eat.

"Nah," he said.

"Are you sure?" Honeypaw asked, peering down at him with wide eyes. Heartpaw barely nodded. Firpaw padded past and narrowed his eyes.

"Don't waste your time on him, he isn't worth it," he said coldly. Honeypaw sighed and got up, trotting after her brother. Heartpaw hauled himself up and dragged himself into his den. He curled up into a ball and closed his eyes to sleep. Just then, Lionbreeze trotted into the apprentice den.

"Hey, you feeling ok?" asked Lionbreeze. "I was looking for my brother. Do you know where he is?" Heartpaw mumbled a reply.

"You alright?" asked Lionbeeze, approaching. He peered down at Heartpaw. "Seem fine to me. Tired?"

"Yeah," Heartpaw managed to utter. Lionbreeze nodded and slipped out of the den. Heartpaw fell into a much needed sleep.

# Ch. 36

Heartpaw pricked his ears as he heard some commotion outside. Yawning, he trotted out. The sun had not full risen yet and the first few rays of sun shone above the tree tops. Roselight was talking excitedly to Spottedwishker, Duskblaze and Darkspeck. Heartpaw wondered what the commotion was but didn't feel the need to eavesdrop, he was just happy to be awake on time. Pinestar was nowhere to be seen. Roselight spotted him and called him over, her voice shaking with excitement.

"I'm having kits," she cried happily. Heartpaw smiled.

"That's great," he said. "Who's the father?"

"Why Foxwhisker of course," piped in Duskblaze. The four cats then returned to chatting joyously among themselves. With a sigh, Heartpaw trotted to the fresh-kill pile. A small sparrow, two mice and a frog lay in the pile. He sniffed the frog. He had never tasted one.

"You should try it," came a voice. He turned around to see Riverclaw.

"Is it good?" asked Heartpaw.

"That's up to you to decide," replied Riverclaw. Heartpaw took the frog and padded to the corner near a bush. He picked at it curiously then took a bite. The skin was chewy but not bad.

"What do you think?" asked Riverclaw.

"It's..., pretty good actually," grinned Heartpaw. He finished the chewy skin then ate the meat. The meat was succulent and tasty and soft. Much softer than he had expected. His eyes went wide. He decided he loved frogs.

"Mmmm," said Heartpaw.

"It's my favourite food too," Riverclaw nodded.

"Oh sorry," exclaimed Heartpaw. "Did you want it?"

"Oh no, it's alright. Frogs are a rare treat in Shadowclan and you've never had one," Riverclaw said.

"How was it, being deputy?" Heartpaw inquired.

"Hmm," thought Riverclaw aloud. "Busy. But..., I loved it. It was a good way of knowing I was taking care of the Clan."

"How was Stormpelt..., as a deputy I mean. I only saw him a few times bossing everyone about," frowned Heartpaw. "I know how he was as a father..." Heartpaw pushed back the sad thoughts. *He was the best father*.

"Stormpelt was... he would have been a great leader. The best. You know, the thing is, and don't ever mention this to anybody, Pinestar needed him. Needs him. Stormpelt was the reason Pinestar was a great leader. He helped Pinestar elaborate his ideas, grounded him, made him a better leader. Without Stormpelt..., I think Pinestar feels a bit lost," sighed Riverclaw, he settled next to Heartpaw.

"But he has Cinderpelt. And you," pointed out Heartpaw. "And Lionbreeze and Eagleflight."

"Yes, but he doesn't have Stormpelt," Riverclaw said. "Cinderpelt..., she's young. And she's a great warrior, don't get me wrong, she knows a lot. She's a great mentor, I've seen her with Featherflame, she was an awesome mentor but she's not Stormpelt and she doesn't get Pinestar." Heartpaw frowned, thinking over what Riverclaw had said. Just then, Pinestar called out his name. Heartpaw sprung to his feet.

"Sorry, gotta go," he said.

"Nothing to be sorry about," Riverclaw said. Heartpaw ran up to Pinestar. His fur was ruffled and looked whiter.

"Come on, we're going to have more battle training today,"

Pinestar said. They ducked out of the camp and padded down towards the middle of the forest. "We're going to start with the back kick." Heartpaw nodded, feeling ready for a hard day of training.

"You must judge your distance from your opponents carefully," explained Pinestar. "Then you must put all your weight on your front paws and let your back legs out explosively." Heartpaw nodded and positioned himself in front of Pinestar.

"You're balancing too much to your left, lean more to the right," corrected Pinestar. Heartpaw nodded and centered himself. Pinestar nodded and Heartpaw got ready. In a quick but clumsy move, he twisted and lashed out his hind legs. They grazed Pinestar's chest.

"Judge the distance," Pinestar repeated. Heartpaw nodded. He tried again. He lashed out his hind legs and caught Pinestar. Pinestar faltered backwards.

"Good job. You really need to push hard with all your strength. Try again," Pinestar ordered. Heartpaw tried again. He repeated the move thirty more times until Pinestar told him to stop. Heartpaw stood panting.

"Now, the enemy won't be standing there, unmoving, waiting for you to move. Or if she or he is, they'll be watching your every move. You can't wait for too long. And it must not be predictable," Pinestar said.

"Right," mumbled Heartpaw.

"Good, first, we are going to try it slowly at first. I will go to that end and we will slowly advance on each other. Then, you chose when, you will launch your back kick," Pinestar said. Heartpaw nodded, his heart beating with anticipation. Pinestar backed away and then they advanced, their bellies and tails low. Heartpaw played the move in his mind and crept forward slowly. He was about to throw the move but faltered, unsure whether Pinestar would anticipate it or if he would miss. He thought about doing it again, as they circled but he didn't, too nervous. *Come on.* He had to do it. They couldn't wait for hours. He twisted and shot

his legs out. He caught Pinestar on the chest and he rolled to the ground with a thud. Heartpaw grinned happily. Pinestar bit his tongue and slowly got up. Heartpaw was too happy to notice.

"Good job," nodded Pinestar. "Let's.. do it again." Heartpaw nodded enthusiastically and they begun the exercise once more.

# Ch. 37

Heartpaw lunged, his paws extended, his eyes locked on his opponent. He imagined a Thunderclan cat and with a ferocious growl, he dodged sideways just in time as Pinestar threw out his front paw. He twisted around and grabbed Pinestar's tail in his mouth and yanked. Pinestar almost yelped but kept his mouth closed. Heartpaw saw Pinestar's momentary lost of balance and jumped onto Pinestar. Pinestar fell the the floor and Heartpaw pinned his back legs to the ground and bit into Pinestar's ear. Pinestar threw him off with a great heave and a harrumph and Heartpaw rolled to the ground. Pinestar then leapt at him but Heartpaw quickly slid sideways and raked his sheathed paws on Pinestar's side. Pinestar landed on the ground, panting heavily, his eyes looked tired.

"Good, that's all for now," Pinestar said. With a suppressed sigh, he flicked his tail. "You can go." Heartpaw nodded and slipped off. He was glad to be let off early. He probably did exceptionally well. The ground was cold and the air stiff. Heartpaw felt the cold wind on his pelt and relished it happily, he was sweating and hot from the fight. Leaf bare was arriving in a moon and a half but it already seemed like leaf-bare. Most trees had already lost all their leaves and Heartpaw sometimes awoke to see the grass covered in frost. He padded through the quiet and cold forest, listening for prey. He loved hunting. It gave him a purpose and something to focus on. It also took his mind off Ivypaw. *Ivypaw*, ugh, why did he have to always think about her? Suddenly, he snapped his head up. He heard a small scuffling. A mouse. He better not miss it. The Clan was low on food although nobody said it or seemed to mind. Crouching, Heartpaw crawled towards the noise. He spotted a small mouse, scuttling around the bottom of a tree. Its paws disturbed the leaves which made it easy to hear. He grinned to himself. Then, quickly, he snapped forward and caught the mouse in his jaw. With a quick bite, he killed it. He buried it quickly and continued on his way, thanking Starclan silently. Heartpaw felt a shiver run down his spine as a strong smell wafted to his nose. He knew he was near the

Carrionplace. Nobody had talked about it since Heartpaw was a kit and Pinestar had never mentioned it to him but he knew what it was. He knew it was a home to many rats. Which were prey but dangerous prey. Curious, he walked cautiously towards the smell. He peered through some trees and spotted a large metal wall, eaten by rust. There were many gaps which would let a cat slip through into the home of the rats. Heartpaw's whiskers twitched, he could hear the loud squeaking of rats. Food. Big fat food.

"Tempting isn't it?" came a voice. Heartpaw almost jumped. He looked up. On the wall, balancing cautiously was a large light grey cat. He grinned.

"Who are you?" Heartpaw said, lowering himself, preparing for attacking.

"I believe I am what you would call a loner, or a rogue," purred the cat. He stood menacingly and Heartpaw felt a shiver of fear.

"What do you want?" asked Heartpaw.

"Nothing," shrugged the cat. "But I know what you want. You want to feed your Clan. Already running out of food and it isn't even winter yet."

"Winter?" repeated Heartpaw, confused.

"Yes," answered the cat. "*Winter*. Or leaf-bare. Ha. What a stupid name."

"Oh...," Heartpaw frowned.

"Yes oh. Now, do you want me to help you or not?" asked the cat.

"I don't need help," replied Heartpaw.

"Really?" the grey cat said, whiskers twitching in slight amusement and disbelief.

"Yeah, I just caught a mouse," Heartpaw announced.

"Oh a mouse eh. So will this mouse, feed your whole Clan?" said the grey cat.

"No...but," Heartpaw said, frowning. His confusion was growing by the second. Who was this loner?

"Come, I know how to hunt rats," said the grey cat and jumped to the other side of the fence. Heartpaw listened and waited. The cat didn't reappear. He should just go back to camp. But instead, pricking with curiosity, he crawled under the fence and into the Carrionplace.

# Ch. 38

Heartpaw stared at a messy forest of...well, he didn't know. The smells were foreign to him. Except the scent of rat. He jumped as the grey cat slunk out from under a small den of brown, rotting wood. In the loner's mouth hung a giant rat. It had sharp and long claws and a sharp tooth stuck out of its mouth. It looked slightly deadlier than he had imagined. He stopped himself from cringing.

"Wondered when you'd come," the loner said. "Even had time to catch myself a rat. Not like it was hard to find. This place is teeming with them."

"What's your name?" asked Heartpaw suddenly.

"Ha," laughed the cat, dropping the rat to the ground. "Wondered when you'd ask. I'm Rio, how'bout you?"

"Heartpaw," Heartpaw said reluctantly. Rio nodded and trotted off, disappearing behind a clump of trash. Heartpaw took a step forward. Some of the ground was hard, like the Thunderpath, other parts were overgrown with weeds and the other parts were covered in all kinds of small things. Heartpaw slunk after Rio, feeling suddenly nervous. The loud squeaking of rats was much louder now and they almost seemed like they were growling. Heartpaw had a growing sense of fear but he followed Rio.

"First thing about catching rats, try not to get all of them after you," Rio said.

"How do I do that?" asked Heartpaw.

"Luck," replied Rio with a glint of amusement.

"Luck?..." echoed Heartpaw softly. Rio nodded and pricked his ears.

"Listen for one," instructed Rio.

"I can hear many, don't worry," muttered Heartpaw. He had a growing sense of unease and felt the great urge to race out.

"Then tell me where they are," Rio said.

"Um, around," muttered Heartpaw, eyeing the place doggedly.

"You're not very good at this," Rio pointed out.

"Whatever, I'm leaving," growled Heartpaw.

"Already?" Rio said. "I thought you might last longer. Not as brave as I thought you'd be." Heartpaw growled at this but didn't answer. He didn't feel brave either.

"Come, on how about I catch the rats, you watch," Rio said. "You could learn like that. You won't have to do anything."

"Fine," muttered Heartpaw. Rio nodded and slunk away. Heartpaw slunk after him, his eyes dodged about. Rio suddenly stopped and a large rat, as big as a kit, appeared, eyeing them with red eyes. It made a scuffling noise but didn't run upon seeing Rio and Heartpaw. Heartpaw felt his heart drop. What kind of prey wasn't scared of its predator. Rio crouched and watched the rat patiently. Suddenly, almost scaring Heartpaw, Rio darted forward and caught the rat in his jaws and bit on hard. The rat squeaked in fury and twisted in Rio's jaw. Rio then brought the rat to the ground hard then bit its neck once more to make sure it was dead.

"Here," Rio said and tossed the rat to Heartpaw. He buried it, in a daze. Then he followed Rio once again. This time, Rio waited for a rat near a small shelter. They didn't have to wait long. A rat poked its head out and without hesitation, Rio brought his front paw down on its head and then bit its neck. It had almost bit him.

"That was close," muttered Heartpaw.

"It was supposed to be," Rio said and pushed the rat to Heartpaw. Heartpaw brought it back to the other rat and buried it. In no time, Rio had caught seven rats. He helped Heartpaw carry

them out back into Shadowclan territory and without warning, Rio disappeared. Heartpaw finished bringing the last rat to the pile of rats and looked up. Rio wasn't there anymore. He had disappeared. Heartpaw frowned. What kind of cat helped a stranger then didn't wait for a thank you? Rio was queer. Heartpaw then only realised he would get in trouble. He was not supposed to go to the Carrionplace. But nobody had ever talked to him about it. So nobody had told him not to go so he could at least use that as an excuse. Then there were the rats. Of course, the Clan would be happy for so much prey but would they believe he had caught it himself? Plus he still had the mouse he had caught much earlier. He sighed. He couldn't bring in all the rats alone so he ran back to camp. Inside, he looked around, Firpaw and Honeypaw were lounging near a bush and Honeypaw smiled when she spotted Heartpaw.

"I was wondering when you'd get back," came a voice. It was Pinestar.

"I went er, hunting," explained Heartpaw.

"Didn't catch anything?" sighed Pinestar. "It's alright. The patrol caught a bird and two mice."

"I did actually. But I needed help to get it here," replied Heartpaw softly. Pinestar frowned. He seemed to be looking into Heartpaw.

"Right, I'll send two cats to come. Will that be enough?" frowned Pinestar.

"Yeah, um maybe three cats?" Heartpaw said awkwardly.

"Right," Pinestar said suspiciously but he called over Deerdapple, Spiderfur and Weaselscar. They followed Heartpaw out of camp.

"So, how much prey did you catch and where that you need four cats to bring it back?" asked Spiderfur.

"Um..., you'll see," replied Heartpaw. Weaselscar narrowed

his eyes. Soon, the three warriors had a sense they were headed towards the Carrionplace.

"Tell me you weren't hunting at the Carrionplace," muttered Deerdapple as the scent of rats carried towards them.

"Well...," Heartpaw trailed off.

"You're not allowed to! Do you know how dangerous it is?" gasped Deerdapple.

"I'm sorry but..., I didn't know. Nobody ever talked to me about it and the Clan didn't have enough food and...," Heartpaw sighed.

"Let's see what you got first," said Weaselscar sternly. They came to the pile of ten dead rats and a mouse.

"Wow...," muttered Spiderfur.

"You caught a lot," Deerdapple said the obvious. They each took three rats and Deerdapple took an extra rat while Weaselscar also took the mouse. They headed back to camp, unable to talk with their mouths full. When they ducked into camp, cats stared at them in disbelief and slight hunger and joy.

"You caught many rats," came Pinestar's angry voice. "You went hunting at the Carrionplace."

"Yeah...," muttered Heartpaw.

"You're not allowed to. Do you know how dangerous it is? If a rat had bitten you. You could die!" Pinestar shouted angrily, his fur rising. Spiderfur stepped in.

"Pinestar, apparently nobody told him. And he didn't get hurt. If anything, he learnt from today. Plus, he did get enough food to feed the whole clan," Spiderfur put in. Pinestar lashed his tail.

"You aren't allowed in the Carrionplace!" he growled. Spiderfur turned to Cinderpelt to say something. She hesitated then walked up to Pinestar.

"Pinestar, he won't go again. He didn't know. He brought back much food, we can all eat," Cinderpelt said.

"So? He wasn't supposed to go there. What if he had gotten bitten?" spat Pinestar in Cinderpelt's face. She backed away, burning with humiliation.

"Pinestar!" said a sharp voice. Eagleflight and Lionbreeze appeared in the crowd.

"Heartpaw, you are not to go to the Carrionplace again," snapped Eagleflight angrily. "Go with Lionbreeze to be checked up immediately. And Pinestar, calm down. We should be thankful for the food." Pinestar sighed, his eyes refocusing. He nodded with a deep breath.

"Everybody, take a rat to share, there is more than enough," he announced. All the cats cheered and trotted over to Heartpaw as he walked to the medicine den with Lionbreeze. They congratulated him and thanked him. He slipped into the den, feeling slightly guilty.

"Don't feel bad," Lionbreeze said, looking through some herbs. He then came up to Heartpaw and checked his ears, eyes, mouth, fur, paws and tail. "Pinestar was just worried. And nobody talks about the Carrionplace. He should have told you. But now you know." Heartpaw nodded sadly.

"It's just...," he sighed. "I was trying to help and I knew it was wrong but I wasn't thinking."

"Well, you seem absolutely fine," Lionbreeze said finally. "Go on, go enjoy the feast." Heartpaw nodded and thanked him and rushed out. Honeypaw beckoned him over. He lay down beside her. She had a big rat in front of her.

"Thought we could share," she smiled. "I can't believe you caught all of this. You're so brave. And a great hunter."

"Thanks," mumbled Heartpaw. He took a bite of the rat. The meat was juicy and succulent. The best food he had had in a

long time. By the time they had finished, Honeypaw and Heartpaw were feeling full and tired. They headed to their dens but Pinestar stopped Heartpaw. Honeypaw gave Heartpaw a worried look then quickly slipped into the apprentice den.

"You should not have gone to the Carrionplace," Pinestar said firmly.

"I'm sorry...," Heartpaw hung his head. "I thought I'd be able to feed the Clan. We haven't had much food."

"I know but it was dangerous and it isn't your duty to feed the whole Clan. And if you felt as if it is, then I am not doing my job as a leader," Pinestar frowned sadly. "You're lucky you didn't get hurt. And there won't be a next time to hunting there. It is not safe." Heartpaw nodded and Pinestar nodded and turned away. Heartpaw slipped into the den. He lay in his nest, near the entrance. A cold draft blew onto him. He shivered.

"You cold? You can sleep in my nest with me," suggested Honeypaw. Heartpaw nodded. He slipped over to her side and curled up next to her. She wrapped her tail around his. It was much better, sleeping at the end of the den, warm and nice. With a full belly. He was going to have a good sleep. With a sigh, he closed his eyes and drifted into a blissful sleep.

# Ch. 39

Heartpaw awoke with a chill. He opened his eyes to see Honeypaw gone. Wondering what time it was, he hurried outside. The sun had long gotten up. With rising panic, he looked around for Pinestar. He was so late. Suddenly, Cinderpelt trotted up to him.

"Pinestar said you wouldn't have lessons today. He told me to put you on a patrol whenever you were awake," Cinderpelt told him. "There's a hunting patrol..., they won't be going to the Carrionplace, now, would you like to go, or to the later one? They're going on border patrol. Windclan border."

"I'll take the border patrol," Heartpaw said quickly, not realising why. Then, as Cinderpelt padded away, he realised why. Because Ivypaw. Ugh. Why was everything Ivypaw? Yes, she was nice and funny but he had met her once and she was from a different Clan. But he also like seeing the moor, stretching wide where Windclan cats could run free with the wind on their pelts. At least, that was how he imagined it. Not feeling hungry, Heartpaw wandered around camp with no purpose then thought about visiting the elders. He trotted to their den. They were talking quickly. He peered into the dim den. Whitecloud lay on the ground, her chest heaving. Riverclaw and Crowtail were talking to her urgently. They looked up to Heartpaw. He looked at Whitecloud worriedly. Should he call Lionbreeze or Eagleflight?

"Does she need Lionbreeze? Or Eagleflight?" he asked.

"No," rasped Whitecloud with an effort. Heartpaw frowned, she certainly looked and sounded like she needed a medicine cat.

"Whitecloud," said Riverclaw urgently. "Come on, you can fight it." Whitecloud smiled slightly.

"No, Riverclaw," she breathed. "It's my time to go. Starclan is calling me." Heartpaw's eyes went wide with worry. He raced to

find Eagleflight or Lionbreeze. Eagleflight was in his den but not Lionbreeze.

"It's Whitecloud!" cried Heartpaw. Eagleflight got up wobbly and followed Heartpaw to the elder's den.

"Whitecloud," said Eagleflight. He crouched near her, his face softening. "Relax." Whitecloud smiled blissfully.

"Whitecloud, you're going to be ok," whispered Crowtail.

"Aren't you going to do something?" asked Riverclaw, looking at Eagleflight expectantly. Heartpaw agreed with him.

"Whitecloud, is it your wish to join Starclan? Are they calling you?" Eagleflight whispered softly. Whitecloud nodded slowly.

"Then, we will miss and mourn you but we hope for you to have good hunting in Starclan," whispered Eagleflight.

"Thank you," whispered Whitecloud, gazing at Crowtail and Riverclaw a last time then took a ragged breath and her closed her eyes.

"She's gone," breathed Crowtail sadly. Riverclaw looked away, his eyes sad. Heartpaw let out a breath he'd been holding. Whitecloud was gone? But she had always been there. Yes, always with a raspy breath and mostly sleeping but she was *there*. And now, she was gone.

"She hunts with Starclan now," said Eagleflight. Riverclaw and Crowtail nodded sadly.

"Heartpaw! Border patrol!" came Cindertail's voice.

"Go," said Crowtail. "But don't tell them yet. I want to be able to tell them myself, with Riverclaw." Heartpaw frowned but nodded. He raced to the camp entrance where Mousewhisker, Birchstep and Thistlenose were waiting. They nodded to him and ducked out of the camp. Heartpaw followed them, numb. He didn't know what he was feeling. It seemed as if all the noises were distant

but it wasn't the overwhelming hopelessness like when he knew he would never see Stormpelt alive again. It was different, like something that he had expected to always be there, never really gave it any thought, was suddenly different, gone. He sighed, it was hard not to break the bad news to his Clanmates as the chatted happily among themselves. Mousewhisker glanced at Heartpaw.

"You're not very talkative. What's the matter?" Mousewhisker asked.

"Nothing," mumbled Heartpaw. They reached the Windclan border. The moor stretched wide before them, the long grasses swaying in the wind. Heartpaw gazed longingly at the moor. He wished he could be running free there. He didn't notice as Mousewhisker and Thistlenose marked the border. He didn't even think about Ivypaw. He smelt the scent of warm wind and the scent of warm different places which the wind, and Windclan cats carried. It calmed him. Finally, his Clanmates turned back towards camp. He followed them as if in a dream. He knew when they got back, it wouldn't be the same. The camp would feel more..., empty. They ducked back into the camp. The patrol had gone quickly to Heartpaw. But when they got back, all cats had their heads bowed and were mourning Whitecloud. Mousewhisker frowned.

"What happened?" he asked. Sorrelclaw looked up.

"Whitecloud is dead," she said.

"Oh no...," murmured Birchstep sadly. Thistlenose and Mousewhisker hung their heads, numb. Heartpaw slunk back into the apprentice den, feeling suddenly angry that Starclan had taken Whitecloud. She had always been there. She was gentle and she would always rest or sun near the elder's den. It wasn't fair that Starclan had taken her.

"She was too old," came a soft voice. Heartpaw looked up. Lionbreeze had padded in.

"But..., she's gone," said Heartpaw.

"I know, but now she's hunting with Starclan," Lionbreeze

said. "Don't worry." Firpaw joined his brother's side.

"Where's Honeypaw?" asked Firpaw.

"She went for a walk, she's really sad," Lionbreeze sighed. Firpaw frowned, clearly worried for his sister.

"Where'd she go?" he asked.

"I don't know. Probably to the middle of the forest," said Lionbreeze.

"I'm going," Firpaw said, glaring at Heartpaw as if he had done something wrong by just being there. Then he stomped off. Lionbreeze followed his brother out, leaving Heartpaw alone. He shoved his head in his paws and closed his eyes. Maybe the sleep would numb the weird feeling of dazedness and numbness he felt.

# Ch. 40

Heartpaw rested on the ground, tired and panting. He had had an intense fighting training with Pinestar but he had managed to pin and bite Pinestar a few times and he felt pretty good about his fighting now. He knew he was improving. He would see it in Pinestar's face. He looked up at the bare trees. One moon till leaf-bare. And tonight it was the Gathering. He felt excited to be able to see Ivypaw once more. He grinned to himself at the thought of her. Finally, he heaved himself up and dragged his tired body back to camp. Pinestar spotted him, his eyes were tired but he didn't act it.

"Good job today. Tomorrow, we will focus more on your hunting techniques. Your fighting has improved much," Pinestar said Heartpaw nodded gratefully. They hadn't had hunting lessons in a while now and he missed it slightly. Pinestar would finally get to see how good he was at hunting. Then Pinestar went to the Tall Stump and leapt upon it.

"Tonight is the Gathering," announced Pinestar to all the cats around. They turned to him. "The cats which are going, include myself, Eagleflight, Lionbreeze and Cindertail. I will also be taking Nightcloud, Shadefern, Duskblaze, Flamefrost, Birchstep, Honeypaw and Oakfall." Heartpaw frowned. Was he going? He hadn't heard his name. Maybe he had missed it. He padded up to Pinestar. Who looked like he wanted to talk to Heartpaw as well.

"Am I going to the Gathering tonight?" asked Heartpaw. "I didn't hear my name."

"No," replied Pinestar. "I was going to talk to you about it. Missing this Gathering will be a punishment for going to the Carrionplace. Don't think I forgot. I know you might think it unfair and I know I didn't tell you but I know you knew better." Heartpaw sighed. There was no arguing with Pinestar. He hung his head. Ivypaw. No Ivypaw. He sighed. He had waited a moon to see her and he wouldn't be able to just because of Pinestar's stupid punishment.

"I'll do anything," Heartpaw suddenly said. "I'll clean the ticks of the elders. I'll hunt for them. I'll do anything. But please can I go to the Gathering?" Pinestar shook his head firmly. Cincerpelt called for him and he excused himself. Heartpaw huffed in anger and stormed into the apprentice den. Honeypaw looked up.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing...," muttered Heartpaw. Honeypaw padded to his side.

"Don't say nothing. We both know something's the matter," she said.

"I can't go to the Gathering. A punishment for going to the Carrionplace apparently," sighed Heartpaw.

"Don't worry, I'll tell you what happens," assured Honeypaw. Heartpaw sighed. He didn't care what happened at the Gathering. He cared about Ivypaw. He frowned. Ugh, why were his thought always about her? Why did he want to see her so much? He sighed. She was funny. Not many cats in his Clan were funny.

"Thanks Honeypaw," smiled Heartpaw. "I appreciate it." Honeypaw smiled and nodded. Heartpaw returned to his nest in dismay and slight anger. Pinestar hadn't even told him about the Carrionplace, it wasn't fair. He sighed, there was nothing he could do now. So he closed his eyes and forced himself to sleep, hopefully so he could miss the departing cats as they went to the Gathering. He didn't want to feel the disappointment of seeing them go without him.

# Ch. 41

Heartpaw woke up to the cats going to the Gathering. He grumbled under his breath and slipped out to see them. Honeypaw smiled at him and beckoned him over.

"Hey, we're leaving now," she told him.

"I know...," mumbled Heartpaw.

"You know you can come till the Thunderpath," said Honeypaw. Heartpaw thought about it then nodded. Pinestar padded over.

"You're not coming to the Gathering," he said sternly. Heartpaw suddenly felt a small rebellious flame in him.

"So that means I can't talk to Honeypaw?" shot back Heartpaw. Pinestar frowned and glared at Heartpaw but stalked away. Honeypaw smiled at Heartpaw and rubbed her cheek to his.

"Ugh. I hate him," muttered Heartpaw.

"I know. Why can't he let us talk," agreed Honeypaw. Why can't he just let me go to the stupid Gathering, thought Heartpaw.

"We're leaving," Pinestar declared. The cats slunk through the camp entrance with Heartpaw and Honeypaw at their heels. They slipped through the forest quietly, running after their Clanmates. Heartpaw felt the exhilaration and the nice feeling of slipping through the shadows. Finally, they reached the Thunderpath. Pinestar motioned for Cindertail and the cats to go in first. Oakfall, Honeypaw's mentor, waited to let Honeypaw go in before him. She smiled at Heartpaw then disappeared into the tunnel. Pinestar beckoned Oakfall to go in next then turned to Heartpaw.

"I'm sorry if you think this punishment is harsh," Pinestar

said finally. "But now you understand that you should not go into the Carrionplace." Heartpaw glared at him and didn't say anything. With a sigh and narrowed eyes, Pinestar slipped into the tunnel and disappeared. Heartpaw trotted away, along the Thunderclan border and towards the Windclan border. The scent of fresh air and warm scents blew to his nose. He breathed it in and crawled through some long grasses, peering past the Thunderpath at Windclan territory. The long grasses swayed in the wind and seemed to be hiding so many secrets. Suddenly, he heard some talking and the soft thumping of swift Windclan cats. Heartpaw crouched low. The Windlcan cats came into view, coming near the Shadowclan border. Fawnstar was talking to Marshtail. They were accompanied by the medicine cat, Addertail and a few more warriors and two apprentices. Then out of the long grasses, appeared another cat. Heartpaw's heart leaped. He recognised her. Ivypaw. He wanted to run to her and greet her and they could share jokes. But she was talking to another apprentice. He had light grey fur and soft yellow eyes. She whispered something to him and he burst out into giggles. A dark orange tabby apprentice turned to them and growled. Ivypaw and the grey cat just turned to each other, their eyes bright with amusement. Heartpaw felt a rush of jealousy. She joked with *him* not that grey cat. Then, when he thought about it, she probably joked with everyone, he wasn't special. Soon, Fawnstar swiftly disappeared and the rest of the warriors and apprentice slipped away. Only Ivypaw stayed, her whiskers twitching. Then she looked right through the Thunderpath and right through into Heartpaw's eyes. Nervously, he got up. He suddenly felt scared she would accuse him of spying or trying to get into Windclan territory. But her face lit up and she smiled. She approached the Thunderpath.

"Heartpaw, is that you?" She said. Heartpaw felt the joy of hearing her voice once more.

"Yeah, it's me," Heartpaw said.

"Are you going to the Gathering?" she asked. "I can't wait to tell you something that happened, it was soo funny." Heartpaw suddenly really wanted to hear the joke but he wasn't going to the Gathering. He sighed sadly.

"No, Pinestar said I couldn't go this time," muttered

Heartpaw.

"Aww," sighed Ivypaw. "But it was really funny. Maybe I'll tell you in another moon."

"No, I want to hear it before," Heartpaw begged, like a kit. She smiled and nodded.

"Meet here, at sunset tomorrow," she grinned at him mischievously. Heartpaw's heart was practically pounding out of his chest. He nodded quickly.

"Ivypaw!" came a sharp voice. She turned around.

"Coming," she yelled. Then she turned her pale eyes to Heartpaw. "See ya." Then she disappeared into the grasses.

# Ch. 42

Heartpaw was resting in his nest when the patrol of cats who went to the Gathering got back. Firpaw stirred in his nest but didn't look up. Honeypaw slipped into the den and headed for Heartpaw.

"Hey," she said.

"Hi," replied Heartpaw.

"Don't worry, I'll tell you all about it," Honeypaw said, settling beside him. Heartpaw's mind was somewhere else though. He wanted to meet the funny Ivypaw and hear her voice.

"It's ok," said Heartpaw. "I'm not really interested actually." Honeypaw frowned.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yeah yeah," mumbled Heartpaw. Frowning, Honeypaw returned to her nest and Heartpaw fell into a blissful dreamy sleep.

Heartpaw woke up excited. He jumped to his paws, fully awake and went to find Pinestar. Pinestar had just sent out a patrol and smiled when he saw Heartpaw.

"I'm ready," declared Heartpaw.

"Great," smiled Pinestar. "You didn't take the punishment too badly then." Heartpaw couldn't even stay mad. He was seeing Ivypaw that night. There was nothing that could make his mood bad. Pinestar slipped out of camp followed by Heartpaw.

"We're going to be hunting birds today. And squirrels," Pinestar told Heartpaw as they headed deeper into the forest.

"I know how to hunt birds," said Heartpaw.

"Not up trees or in trees," Pinestar replied.

"Wow, you mean I'll chase a bird up a tree?" exclaimed Heartpaw.

"It'll try to fly away and you'll use the tree," answered Pinestar. They stopped and Pinestar told Heartpaw to sit down. "You are going to...." Heartpaw was already droning out. He couldn't help but think about what Ivypaw wanted to tell him.

"Heartpaw!" snapped Pinestar. Heartpaw snapped back to the present.

"Yes?" he answered.

"Are you listening?" Pinestar questioned.

"Yes," answered Heartpaw quickly. Pinestar narrowed his eyes but nodded.

"Then, it's your turn," Pinestar said. Heartpaw cringed, it was going to be a long day of training.

Heartpaw entered camp with a squirrel in his mouth. He hadn't been able to catch any birds. It was almost sunset. As he dropped the squirrel into the pile, he remembered what Ivypaw had said. Her favourite food was squirrel. He grinned to himself and picked the squirrel up again. Honeypaw trotted to his side.

"Hey, do you want to share?" she asked. "I love squirrel."

"Er.., sorry," muttered Heartpaw. He couldn't say he was going to eat it himself. "I um..., I er, gotta go."

"Oh, where are you going?" asked Honeypaw.

"Oh um hunting," replied Heartpaw.

"It's almost night," Honeypaw pointed out.

"I know but I hide better at night," answered Heartpaw, itching to get away.

"I'll come," Honeypaw decided. Heartpaw groaned inwardly.

"I need to..., do it myself," Heartpaw said finally. "It's just..." He thought hard. Honeypaw watched him carefully.

"You don't want me to come?" whiskered Honeypaw.

"Of course not!" exclaimed Heartpaw quickly and Honeypaw smiled. "It's just..., I need to be alone. To think you know." Honeypaw nodded.

"I'll see you then. We can hunt together tomorrow," she said.

"Yeah! That would be awesome!" cried Heartpaw relieved. Honeypaw's smile stretched wider and she trotted away, humming to herself. Heartpaw, with the squirrel in his mouth quickly slid out of camp and headed swiftly for the Windclan border. He wasn't breaking any rules, he told himself. He wasn't even going to cross the border. And he wasn't going to let Ivypaw cross either. The sun had just finished setting. He was late. He bounded faster, slipping in and out of the shadows. Finally, he reached the Windclan border and the scent of Windclan carried to his nose. He smiled blissfully and peered through the grasses. The other side was silent. Then, there was a rustling and Ivypaw appeared. Her beautiful eyes locked with Heartpaw. He dropped the squirrel. She gasped and her mouth turned into a beam.

"You got a squirrel!" she cried. Heartpaw nodded. He didn't know how he was going to get it to her. "Cross the Thunderpath. It's fine. Nobody will know. I'll show you, Windclan is awesome! Don't you love the smell of freedom? Here, the sky touches the ground. We are the closest to Starclan." Heartpaw could believe it. He picked up the squirrel. He didn't need to think twice, he looked both sides of the Thunderpath, listened carefully then pelted across it. He reached the other side and bumped into Ivypaw. They both sprawled to the ground, rolling on the long grasses. Slowly, Heartpaw got up.

"Sorry," He apologised. The squirrel lay beside him. Ivypaw got up and the grasses surrounded them, long and tall.

"It's alright," beamed Ivypaw. "Can I?"

"Sure. I caught it for you," said Heartpaw then looked down in embarrassment.

"That's so sweet," she said. She took a bite and her eyes went wide. "Mmmm." Heartpaw smiled and looked around. The grass swayed gently and the breeze felt good in his pelt.

"Is the grass here long everywhere?" asked Heartpaw curiously.

"No," replied Ivypaw. "This is the best thing ever. Thank you so much." She ate, savoring every bite. Heartpaw watched her, feeling a dizzy feeling in his head and some sort of fluttering in his stomach. She looked up at him and smiled. She finished her squirrel.

"Thanks," she told him when she had finished every bite.

"No problem," grinned Heartpaw. She sat down, facing Shadowclan territory. Heartpaw sat beside her, their pelts brushed and a warm feeling ran through Heartpaw.

"So..., what did you want to tell me?" asked Heartpaw. Ivypaw smiled.

"Well..., I don't know if I should tell you but guess what? Firepaw is becoming a warrior soon," cried Ivypaw. Heartpaw felt slightly dubbed that Ivypaw didn't want to tell him what he had been waiting the whole day to hear.

"That's great," smiled Heartpaw.

"Yeah, I won't have to be in the same den as him anymore," grinned Ivypaw. "So how is with Firpaw?"

"He's annoying. As always. The thing is, he isn't like his siblings, Honeypaw or Lionbreeze," said Heartpaw.

"What do you mean?" asked Ivypaw.

"Honeypaw is really nice, although she used to ignore me all the time in the nursery like Lionbreeze," said Heartpaw.

"Lionbreeze is your medicine cat right?" Ivypaw said.

"Yep. He should still be an apprentice but he's awesome so..."

"That's so cool."

"I know right. Anything interesting happening with Thunderclan?"

"Nah. I mean, we had some sort of prophecy some time back. It's so stupid. Addertail got it, Starclan talked to him about something and he didn't understand. I mean, why does Starclan have to make everything unclear." Heartpaw thought about the time he had met Brightheart.

"Yeah. I know."

"So, do you have siblings?"

"No," Heartpaw replied flatly. He didn't like discussing his parents, not even with Ivypaw.

"My dad died when I was a kit. He used to bring me out and teach me skills. He'd let me play with his tail and climb on his back. Then one day, he came into the nursery and see me and I was angry with my sister, Mintpaw and he came to say hello but I got mad at him. And I shouted at him to go. And he left, saying he loved me but I ignored him and he went on patrol. And Thunderclan attacked the patrol. And he died with me being mad at him." Heartpaw thought in silence. He wrapped his tail around Ivypaw's to comfort her.

"Brightheart, my mother died when I was born. I only had Stormpelt. But then he died as well. Because of Thunderclan," sighed Heartpaw finally. It hurt him to talk about his parents to someone he barely knew and suddenly, he didn't feel as much attached to Ivypaw as he thought.

"It feels empty though, doesn't it? And then you, sorta get used to it," Ivypaw said instead. Heartpaw frowned. He had never talked about it to anybody. And the way Ivypaw talked, soothing and calm, sure of herself, it made him feel better, as if he weren't

alone.

"Yeah. It does," whispered Heartpaw.

"But I've got you. And you've got me," whispered Ivypaw, she leaned her head against Heartpaw. Heartpaw smiled, something in his heart flared, filling a small part of his heart. Ivypaw's stomach fluttered with butterflies as she leaned against him, she had never felt like this. They leaned against each other, talking about their feelings, laughing and joking till the middle of the night. Finally, Heartpaw had to leave.

"I need to go," he said solemnly.

"Bye," whispered Ivypaw. "I'll..miss you." Heartpaw beamed.

"Me too," he said. And he knew they both liked each other more than friends.

"Tomorrow?" asked Heartpaw. "I won't be late." Ivypaw laughed.

"Can't wait," she said and slipped away, twirling her tail along Heartpaw's head. He watched as he disappeared then turned to the Thunderpath. He listened carefully then sprinted back to the otherside. He was home. He bounded back towards camp. His heart pumped in his chest, he was bursting with happiness. He had seen Ivypaw and she was so happy to see him. He slipped back into the apprentice den and curled up into his nest. Honeypaw shuffled. She looked up groggily.

"You're so late," she murmured. Heartpaw didn't answer, falling into happy dreams.

# Ch. 43

"You're not concentrated," Pinestar said.

"What, oh sorry," muttered Heartpaw, looking up.

"What did I just tell you?" Pinestar repeated with a sigh.

"That er..., I shouldn't put my weight on my hind legs?" guessed Heartpaw.

"You *should* put your weight on your hind legs," huffed Pinestar in frustration. "How many times do I need to repeat myself?" Heartpaw sighed. He was too preoccupied. He couldn't concentrate. He could only think of the warm feeling of seeing Ivypaw.

"I'm listening, I'm sorry," apologised Heartpaw.

"You keep saying that," Pinestar said. "Why are you so distracted?"

"I'm sorry, I just, didn't sleep well," Heartpaw said.

"Right then let's start from the top."

Heartpaw slunk into camp, exhausted. He wanted to crawl into his nest and sleep but he was going to meet Ivypaw that evening for the second time. Honeypaw trotted to his side, eyeing him worriedly.

"You alright?" she asked.

"Fine," replied Heartpaw.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, just tired." Honeypaw frowned as she watched Heartpaw look up at the sky. The sun was about to set. "I'll see ya." He then raced out of camp. Sighing, Honeypaw returned to the

apprentice den, her thoughts flickering to Heartpaw. Heartpaw raced towards his meeting point with Ivypaw. He reached just in time. Everything was quiet. He watched the sun set, it cast beautiful colours across the sky. He waited till the sun had set and the moon slowly rose, shining a glowing light on the night world. Crickets chirped and an owl hooted. He waited, looking at the spot Ivypaw should be. There was some rustling and then her head appeared. He broke into a smile.

"Your turn to come over," he said. She grinned and nodded. Looking both sides, she raced across the Thunderpath and joined him, panting and laughing on the other side. They lay next to each other and she licked a bit of his fur sticking up on his forehead.

"There, that's better," she meowed.

"I was really tired today," laughed Heartpaw. Talking to Ivypaw was easy. There was nothing he was scared to tell her.

"Me too," she agreed. "But it was worth it, to see you." Heartpaw purred and rubbed his cheek against hers. She sighed sadly.

"But it'll never work, will it?" she whispered.

"What do you mean?" he frowned, looking at her with wide eyes.

"Don't look at me like that. You know what I mean," she said sadly.

"It'll work, we'll make it work," Heartpaw said desperately.

"Will it? We're going against the warrior code. I know you haven't told your Clanmates about this, why? Because we both know it's wrong," Ivypaw said. "I don't want to be the one who says this. But we're from different Clans."

"It doesn't matter," Heartpaw urged. "If the Clans won't let us stay together, if Starclan is against us, we'll leave. We won't ever come back. We could make our own world."

"Are you prepared to leave everything you've known, for me?" whispered Ivypaw.

"Of course," said Heartpaw firmly.

"The ones who love you? The ones you love?" she asked again.

"There is noone anymore," Heartpaw replied. Ivypaw understood.

"We'll make it work, I promise," whispered Heartpaw. Ivypaw leaned her head against his.

"I hope we will, because I've never felt what I feel with you," she whispered, her eyes twinkling. Heartpaw felt his heart flare and he understood what Brightheart meant to Stormpelt. He could never lose Ivypaw.

# Ch. 44

Heartpaw yawned and blinked his eyes open. Honeypaw peered down at him. He jumped up in surprise.

"Relax, it's just me. Pinestar said you could have a day off. Me too," Honeypaw told him with a small beam. "Apparently we're running really low on food and it's getting really cold and a few cats may be sick." Heartpaw nodded, his head thumped and he puffed out his fur, feeling a cold breeze blow into the apprentice den.

"Do you want to go hunting?" asked Honeypaw. "Together."

"What I really want, is sleep," mumbled Heartpaw but Honeypaw didn't hear him. She dragged him out into the cold morning air and then led him out of camp. If he was going to have a day off, he would have liked being able to sleep, what was the point of having a day off if he was going to wake up even earlier. The air was still and cold and the ground hard and frozen. Leaf-bare was near. Heartpaw shivered, the cold air woke up him completely. He followed Honeypaw. Finally, they stopped and listened and looked for prey. Heartpaw's pads were getting number by the minute.

"It's too cold to be outside," he shivered.

"I hear something," whispered Honeypaw. She pointing towards a mess of brambles with her tail. With a silent sigh, Heartpaw nodded. Together, they approached the bush and suddenly, a scrawny mouse shot out. Quickly, Honeypaw jumped onto it but it twisted out of her reach. Heartpaw leapt onto it, snapping its spine quickly.

"Nice one!" she said. "I lost it."

"You heard it and saw it," pointed out Heartpaw.

"We're a good team," Honeypaw beamed. Heartpaw nodded.

They continued on their way, coming upon a sparrow which flitted away without their chance of even getting near. The whole morning, they skulked the forest and even met a hunting patrol but they couldn't catch anything more than the mangy mouse they had caught in the morning. Sighing, they walked towards camp. Honeypaw pressed her pelt against Heartpaw and he felt himself warming up. They kept each other warm as they made their way to camp. Then Firpaw jumped in front of them and smirked.

"Lovebirds," he snickered. Heartpaw frowned and hissed angrily but Honeypaw could only smile, slightly embarrased.

"Go mind your own business, you know nothing," snapped Heartpaw. Honeypaw nodded to agree but Heartpaw pulled away from her side and stalked away. She looked after him in dismay and hurt.

"Don't waste your time on him, sister," spat Firpaw. "He's not worth it." Honeypaw turned to him angrily.

"Don't tell me what to do! You don't even know him! I can do what I want," she raised her voice angrily and ran after Heartpaw. She found him mumbling to himself.

"Ignore my brother, he shouldn't stop you from doing what you want," she told him. Heartpaw nodded.

"I know, don't worry," he told her. She smiled.

"Great then," she said and twirled her tail around his and pressed closer to him. He didn't seem to notice her. His mind was somewhere else. It was with Ivypaw. They returned back to camp and Heartpaw headed for the apprentice den. He slipped into his nest and curled up. He would get to see Ivypaw once again that night. He couldn't wait. Suddenly, there was a commotion outside. He peered out of his den.

"Lionbreeze!" yelled Featherflame. "It's Raggedscar, Eagleflight and Birchstep!" Heartpaw spotted Lionbreeze rushing to the warrior's den. He frowned, narrowing his eyes. Honeypaw joined his side.

"They're sick," she told him. "They have greencough..." Heartpaw gasped.

"Since when?" he exclaimed.

"Aren't you paying attention? They've had it for a few days now. I guess its worse," whispered Honeypaw. Lionbreeze and the three sick cats appeared. Lionbreeze led them towards the elder's den.

"Riverclaw! Crowtail! Get out and go to the warriors den, the sick cats need to stay away form the others," ordered Lionbreeze. Riverclaw and Crowtail appeared, looking dazed. Eagleflight coughed and choked. He stumbled to his knees and Shadefern quickly helped him back to his feet.

"Don't worry about me Lionbreeze, take care of Raggedscar and Birchstep," Eagleflight said, his old eyes looked tired. "And make sure to check the other cats in case they have the first symptoms. I can take care of myself." Lionbreeze frowned but helped Raggedscar and Birchstep into the elder's den. He then raced out to get catmint and check on other cats. He made every cat, including Heartpaw line up in front of him for a check up. Just as Heartpaw was in the middle of the line, waiting for his turn, Sunwhisper started coughing. Then her coughing turned into hacking.

"Sunwhisper, to the elder's den now!" ordered Lionbreeze then her turned to Weaselscar who was not sick. "Give her catmint and Feverfew. Make sure the other's are alright." He then turned to the line. Before Heartpaw's turn, Mousewhisker, Daisyfoot and Deerdapple were sent to the elders den with greencough as well. Lionbreeze checked Heartpaw then instructed him to return to his den where he would not get sick till further notice. He slipped into the den where Firpaw and Honeypaw were talking softly. They looked up when he came in and Honeypaw's eyes lingered on him then turned back to her brother. he joined them.

"Do you think they'll survive?" whispered Firpaw said finally.

"Of course," replied Heartpaw, he wasn't worried. How bad

was greencough anyways?

"Well, Eagleflight doesn't look too good," Firpaw replied, worried.

"He's the medicine cat, he'll be fine," assured Honeypaw. Firpaw huffed and slipped into his nest.

"When are they going to let us out?" asked Honeypaw. Cindertail poked her head into the den.

"When we know which cats have greencough and which ones don't," Cindertail said firmly. "Till then, none of you are to come out. Understood?"

"Yeah, sure," muttered Firpaw.

"Of course," nodded Honeypaw. Heartpaw curled up in his nest, he still felt excited, he was going to meet Ivypaw. He slept through the whole afternoon and he awoke to brutal hacking and coughing. There were a few chokes then some more coughing then silence. He peered out of the apprentice den. Honeypaw was sitting in her nest, eyes wide and Firpaw was still asleep.

"Did you hear that?" whispered Honeypaw, eyes wide with fear.

"Yes," murmured Heartpaw.

"It stopped...," she trailed off.

"It's probably a good sign," assured Heartpaw. Then there were a few muffled cries and a bit of sobbing then he spotted Lionbreeze slinking back towards his den.

"Lionbreeze!" called Heartpaw. He looked up.

"Not now, Heartpaw," he said with a sigh.

"What happened?" insisted Heartpaw. "Are they alright?" Lionbreeze hung his head.

"I tried... I tried...," he whispered.

"What do you mean?" cried Honeypaw, poking her head out of the medicine den. Lionbreeze looked away.

"Eagleflight and Deerdapple are dead," croaked Lionbreeze then he marched back to the medicine den. Heartpaw turned to Honeypaw. She gave a silent cry of horror. Then Pinestar appeared, he looked more tired than ever.

"You may come out, Lionbreeze needs help," he told them solemnly.

"Eagleflight and Deerdapple, are they really?" whispered Honeypaw. Pinestar nodded sadly.

"But you can help, go ask Lionbreeze what he needs help for," instructed Pinestar. The two apprentices slipped to the medicine den, the camp was eerily silent and cold. Frost covered the grass. In the den, Lionbreeze was rummaging furiously through piles of herbs.

"Do you need help?" asked Heartpaw. He hadn't fully accepted the death of his Clanmates.

"No," Lionbreeze snapped.

"Pinestar said we could help. Don't be so hard on yourself," Honeypaw said, giving her brother a lick of comfort. Lionbreeze sighed.

"I should still be an apprentice," he said. "Eagleflight should still be my mentor."

"What do you want us to do?" asked Heartpaw.

"I need more Catmint," Lionbreeze muttered. "It stopped growing a moon ago... But go check. By the stream. You know where there is that bunch of purple plants." Honeypaw nodded and she trotted out. Heartpaw was at her heels. They headed towards the stream and towards Windclan territory. He wished he could see Ivypaw. His Clan was upside down. He didn't understand what was

happening. He shivered in the cold. They finally found a clump of catmint. It wasn't much and most of it was dead but they managed to drag it back to camp. Lionbreeze nodded his thanks and ran to the elder's den. Heartpaw and Honeypaw slipped back into the apprentice den.

"I need a hunting patrol!" called out Clawpelt. Honeypaw pricked her ears.

"Let's go," she told Heartpaw. He hesitated. he wanted to see Ivypaw. But he still could, after the patrol.

"Fine," relented Heartpaw. They slipped out and joined Clawpelt. He eyed Honeypaw then turned around.

"Let's go," he said. Dustbreeze joined them and the slipped out. Clawpelt gave Honeypaw and Heartpaw a serious look.

"Honeypaw, you go with Dustbreeze, Heartpaw... I'm going alone so you go alone as well," said Clawpelt and he slunk off. Honeypaw gave Heartpaw a longing look then took off after Dustbreeze. Happy, Heartpaw bounded towards Windclan border. He would get to hunt and see Ivypaw. He sniffed the air, it was cold but there was no sign of prey. Soon, without catching any sign of any living things, it was sunset. He raced to the usual meeting spot and peered through the grasses. He hoped he wouldn't have to wait long. Soon, the sun had set and he lay, waiting in the grasses for Ivypaw. A few monsters raced past him, their loud noises, pounding in his ears. The moons rose and stars twinkled in the sky. He sighed, where was she? He waited and waited. Till he finally heard something, but it was coming from behind him. He leapt to his paws and turned around. Clawpelt pushed his dark face through the grasses. He barred his teeth.

"What are you doing here?" he growled. Heartpaw suddenly felt scared, what if Clawpelt knew?

"Hunting?" replied Heartpaw.

"You've been out too long," he snapped. "We've had to search everywhere for you. Your stupid trail led us from the camp, round

again towards the stream then another round back near the camp then to the middle of the forest then here. What are you even doing here? Hoping to catch something by lying still?"

"Yeah..., I mean, you know, surprise attack," Heartpaw said.

"Did you catch anything?" interrogated Clawpelt, fur bristling.

"Well, no," Heartpaw said. Clawpelt hissed then swivelled around and marched away. Heartpaw followed him, head down.

# Ch. 45

Heartpaw looked up at the stars. He knew his parents were there, watching him. He smiled sadly. Another cat slipped next to him.

"You alright?" asked Honeypaw.

"Sure," said Heartpaw. But he wasn't. Why hadn't Ivypaw met him? Was she hurt? Did someone find out? Did she not like him anymore?

"Heartpaw, how do you feel about me?" asked Honeypaw.

"What do you mean?" asked Heartpaw.

"I don't know..., sometimes I think we both feel the same but other times..., I'm not sure," said Honeypaw. "You keep acting weird. You're always going out at sunset." Heartpaw turned his head to her.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"At sunset," frowned Honeypaw. "You always leave. You say you go hunting but... you come back so late."

"How do you know?" Heartpaw almost growled.

"Well..., I... we're going off topic. What do you really feel about me?" Honeypaw sighed. "I really thought we felt the same."

"Honeypaw, I don't understand," said Heartpaw.

"Do you love me?" asked Honeypaw. Heartpaw's eyes went wide but he quickly looked away. "What?" was his only thought. Instead he said, "Of course, you're like a sister. My family." Honeypaw looked down.

"What's wrong?" asked Heartpaw, concerned.

"I thought you loved me," whispered Honeypaw. "I thought we could be mates."

"What...?" whispered Heartpaw then gave Honeypaw a comforting nudge. "I'm sorry..., I thought we were just friends. You're like my sister."

"B-but we hang out and sometimes our p-pelts brush and we twirl our tails together," stammered Honeypaw.

"I have never done that," Heartpaw said, suddenly remembering Ivypaw. He had to stay loyal to her. "You do it. If you've realised, I've never done it." Honeypaw snorted and growled then stomped away into the den. Heartpaw slipped in after her. She was curled up in her nest.

"Honeypaw?" Heartpaw murmured. She turned away.

"Honeypaw..., I'm sorry," whispered Heartpaw. Firpaw looked up.

"Shut up!" he snapped. Heartpaw glared at him and padded nearer to Honeypaw. He bent over but she turned around and faced him, her eyes sharp and angry.

"Go away," she growled softly but menacingly. Heartpaw backed away, he had never seen her scared.

"I'm sorry," he said. She didn't answer. He crawled into his nest. He really needed to see Ivypaw now.

# Ch. 46

Heartpaw woke up to a horrible wailing. He crawled out of the apprentice den. Pinestar padded over to him.

"Mousewhisker didn't make it," Pinestar said. Heartpaw dipped his head. How many cats were going to die because of greencough.

"Lionbreeze is running out of catmint and herbs," Pinestar told him. "You won't have training for some time. Go get as much wet moss as you can and a lot of dry moss for bedding. Dandelionfrost has greencough as well." Heartpaw nodded and shot out of camp. He raced towards where the moss grew the most. He tore out pieces, they were frozen but he couldn't worry about that. He dragged the bedding into camp then raced away for more. This time, he brought it to the river. He didn't even think of Ivypaw, he had to take care of his Clan. He dipped as much as he could into the cold stream which had luckily not frozen yet and brought it back to camp. Lionbreeze was talking to Pinestar.

"Then go, but Cindertail is going with you," said Pinestar.

"Fine," relented Lionbreeze. Pinestar nodded and went to fetch Cindertail. Lionbreeze spotted Heartpaw.

"Bring the moss outside of the elders den," ordered Lionbreeze and as Heartpaw walked past him he whispered, "what did you do to Honeypaw." Heartpaw swivelled around.

"I'm sorry..., is she still mad?" asked Heartpaw.

"Mad?" said Lionbreeze then took a deep breath. "Hurt."

"I didn't mean it. Are you mad at me?" asked Heartpaw. He felt bad for Honeypaw. He hadn't realised what had been going on. He sighed, he would have to talk to her.

"No," Lionbreeze said and walked away but his usually gentle eyes blazed with something else. Heartpaw quickly brought the wet moss near the elders den. He heard some awful coughing and winced. He wanted to go inside and comfort his Clanmates but he didn't want to get sick. He really wanted to see Ivypaw. She would make things alright. The camp was chaos. Cats were running about, trying to organise patrols while trying to find ways to keep food. Heartpaw sighed.

"Do you need anything else?" asked Heartpaw to Pinestar as he passed with Cindertail.

"Go hunt. We need the food," Pinestar said distracted. Heartpaw nodded and watched as Cindertail and Lionbreeze slipped out of camp together. He crawled out of camp and watched them disappear then he shot towards the WindClan border. He crept through the long grasses. He knew there was almost zero chance Ivypaw wouldn't be there, but he wanted to be sure. He peered through. The WindClan grass blew gently. Everything was silent. The cold breeze bit his ears. He wondered how it was, in WindClan in leaf-bare with the wind so ruthless with no trees to protect them, exposed in the wind. He shivered, he would not like. Suddenly, there was some talking and rustling. Heartpaw hid and spotted a patrol further off. And he spotted two other figures. Cindertail and Lionbreeze. What were they doing? The patrol and Lionbreeze exchanged a few words then they were led down into WindClan territory. Suddenly, Ivypaw appeared.

"Ivypaw!" cried Heartpaw.

"Shh," said Ivypaw.

"Why didn't you come yesterday?" asked Heartpaw.

"I had... problems at WindClan," said Ivypaw. "Two of our elders have greencough. My Clan needed me, I wanted to stay with them. I hope you understand." Heartpaw nodded slowly. Ivypaw had not seen him because she was there for her Clan. He should have been too. He should have put his Clan first. They needed him as well.

"Is there something wrong?" Ivypaw asked.

"No, you're right," said Heartpaw.

"Ok...," frowned Ivypaw.

"How did you know I'd be here?" asked Heartpaw.

"I was on border patrol and we saw Lionbreeze and Cindertail. They needed herbs. Apparently your Clan has sick cats as well. So I guess yesterday we should both have been with our Clan. Anyways, I thought I'd come and see if you were here, just in case."

"Yeah, thanks," Heartpaw replied. He sighed. He should have been there for his Clan. Like Ivypaw had. "I have to go. Sorry." Ivypaw frowned but nodded.

"I'll see you then," she smiled. Heartpaw nodded and streaked off. He was going to help his Clan, even with the smallest things like bringing wet moss.

# Ch. 47

The ground was frozen over and the air was cold and frosty. Heartpaw fluffed up his fur but it didn't help. Leaf-bare had arrived. He crawled forward, listening for prey. He couldn't smell anything but cold. His pads were getting colder and number by the minute. He heard some rustling. Almost too eager, he crept forward quickly. Suddenly, an eagle swooped down, it's large wings beating loudly. Heartpaw jumped back, surprised. Then the eagle started flailing its wings, hurt. Heartpaw lunged at it quickly. Its claws raked his side but he kept a hold of it. Finally, he managed to kill it and the large bird lay dead. He would be able to feed at least four cats with it.

"Hey!" growled a voice. Heartpaw spun around. He suddenly realised he was near the ThunderClan border. "That was ours!" Heartpaw snarled back, his fur bristling.

"No it's not," snapped back Heartpaw. "I killed it." The cat on the other side of the Thunderpath barred his teeth.

"Give it back apprentice," he hissed. Heartpaw felt anger flare in him. The eagle had been in his territory.

"It's ours!" snapped Heartpaw. "I killed it on my territory." Then another apprentice slipped into side with the ThunderClan warrior. He had light brown striped fur.

"Mousedung!" yelled the apprentice. He leapt forward onto the Thunderpath but the ThunderClan warrior grabbed him by the scruff.

"Bramblepaw! What are you doing!? It's a Thunderpath for StarClan's sake," snapped the warrior. Bramblepaw hung his head but glared at Heartpaw.

"Sorry Darkstorm," murmured Bramblepaw. The warrior glared at Heartpaw.

"We hurt the bird. Give it back," snarled Darkstorm. "Or I'll have to get it back myself." Two more warriors appeared near Darkstorm. A russet furred warrior narrowed her eyes at Heartpaw and hissed.

"He stole our prey," informed Darkstorm. Heartpaw suddenly felt scared.

"I did not!" he said. Then he smelt a warm scent. Honeypaw. He sighed in relief. She hadn't been talking to him lately but she was still his Clanmate and he knew she would help.

"Give it back to them," she whispered in his ear. Heartpaw turned to her in disbelief.

"What do you mean? I killed it on our territory," said Heartpaw. Honeypaw shrugged.

"Look at them, they're skinny. And they did hurt it," Honeypaw replied.

"I'm not giving it back," snapped Heartpaw then turned to face the warriors. "We're on our territory and we killed this eagle first. I don't care if you hurt it or not." Darkstorm growled.

"Listen to your mate," threatened the russet furred cat. Heartpaw turned on his heel and took the eagle in his mouth. He hoped the hunting patrol would find them soon. Honeypaw crouched near him.

"Give it back to them," she told him.

"Wait, listen. The hunting patrol is coming," said Heartpaw. Honeypaw pricked her ears. She heard the thudding of paws and suddenly, Skytail, Firpaw and Rabbitleap appeared.

"What's going on?" questioned Skytail, looking at the ThunderClan cats. Darkstorm hissed.

"They took our food," he said. The other warrior with dark grey fur nodded.

"We hurt it and your apprentice stole it," hissed the grey furred cat.

"But he killed it on our territory so it is ours," announced Rabbitleapt. He nodded to Firpaw, Honeypaw and Heartpaw who started dragging the eagle away. Darkstorm hissed and snarled form the border but Rabbitleap and Skytail kept them on their side. When they reached camp, Skytail and Rabbitleap joined them.

"Nice catch!" said Dustbreeze. Heartpaw trotted to Pinestar who was talking hurriedly to Lionbreeze.

"Sandwing has caught it too. Sunwhisper and Raggedscar..., won't make it," Lionbreeze said sadly. "It's up to StarClan now... And Roselight, she's going to be kitting soon." Pinestar growled under his breath.

"Nobody else must get sick," said Pinestar then spotted Heartpaw.

"Sandwing... has greencough?" Heartpaw echoed.

"Heartpaw...," Lionbreeze sighed.

"Yes, but you cannot see her. You must not catch it," said Pinestar.

"Lionbreeze," called Foxwhisker. "Roselight is starting to kit!" Lionbreeze rushed to the nursery. Pinestar turned to Heartpaw.

"Heartpaw..., I'm sorry but you can't see her," Pinestar said. "None of the sick cats are getting better."

"But why not?" cried Heartpaw. "They have Lionbreeze." Pinestar nodded sadly.

"We cannot afford to have anymore sick cats anymore." Pinestar walked away. Heartpaw retreated to find Honeypaw. She was talking with Firpaw.

"Honeypaw, Firpaw? Sandwing is sick," said Heartpaw. Honeypaw spring to her feet.

"What do you mean, she's sick?" growled Honeypaw.

"She has greencough," said Heartpaw.

"Who told you that?" frowned Firpaw.

"Lionbreeze," said Heartpaw.

"Since when?" cried Honeypaw, brushing past Heartpaw. "He didn't tell us."

"Let's go see her," Firpaw said, following his sister.

"You can't. Pinestar doesn't want anyone to get sick anymore," Heartpaw said. Honeypaw swirled around and snarled. Firpaw touched his tail to her side.

"Let's go. Ignore him," Firpaw whispered.

"I'll do what I want Heartpaw. Shut up," snapped Honeypaw and she marched away. Firpaw glared at Heartpaw one last time before following his sister. Heartpaw sighed. I guess she is still mad at me, he thought to himself. He felt the cold wind on his fur and slipped back into the apprentice den. After a while, he heard some happy cries and talking. He slipped out. He spotted Duskblaze.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Roselight just finished kitting," smiled Duskblaze. "She has four healthy kits." Lionbreeze walked out of the nursery with a smile. Something good, finally. Heartpaw trotted to the nursery and poked his head in to congratulate Roselight.

"Hey," he smiled. Foxwhisker was lying next to Roselight, licking one of his kits.

"Hello Heartpaw," smiled Roselight, her face bright.

"This is great. Congratulations. What are their names?" asked Heartpaw.

"This one is Briarkit," said Foxwhisker, nodding to the kit he

was licking. She was a dark brown tabby kit. "She looks just like Roselight."

"This is Mosskit," said Roselight to a tiny white kit. "And Dawnkit." Dawnkit had a brownish orange pelt. "And this little one is Flamekit." Flamekit, had a bright orange pelt and looked almost like his father althought Foxwhisker's pelt was darker.

"They're so cute," Heartpaw praised.

"Thank you," Foxwhisker said with pride. Thistlenose touched Heartpaw on the side.

"Hey, others want to have a chance to meet the new kits," he grinned.

"Sorry," said Heartpaw and trotted out. Heartpaw headed for the camp entrance. He wanted to exit the chaotic place. The first good news for a moon had been Roselight kitting. None of the sick cats had gotten better. With a sigh, he walked through the frozen forest. He hadn't had training for a moon as Pinestar had been too busy trying to manage all the sick cats and fresh kill. Heartpaw sighed. The cold numbed him but he didn't care, it felt better not to feel anything.

# Ch. 48

Heartpaw ran through the forest. His feet were a blur. He went on and on. His lungs were burning but he didn't care. The trees rushing past him blurred in his vision. He was just running. Running from his chaotic life. He ran and ran. He didn't ever want to stop. He didn't care that his muscles were aching and his chest and lungs were on fire. He didn't care that he was running further and further away. But he couldn't keep running forever. He halted. Suddenly, a wave of exhaustion washed over him and he fell to the ground. The frozen ground was a relief to his overheating and sweating body. He gasped for breath. His chest heaving up and down. He closed his eyes. The cold ground was refreshing. He wanted to stay there forever. He could do that. He let himself fall into darkness.

Somebody was prodding him. Heartpaw mumbled. He didn't want to wake up. But he was cold. He was frozen. Somebody licked his cheek. His eyes flitted open. Cindertail looked down at him.

"Get up. You're going to freeze," she said. Heartpaw huffed. He was too tired. "Come on Heartpaw. Sandwing is getting better." Heartpaw pricked his ears.

"I'm not joking," Cindertail said. "Now get up. She wants to talk to you." Frowning, Heartpaw slowly got up, every muscle in his body cried with pain. Cindertail helped him and he limped back to camp.

"What were you doing?" asked Cindertail. "You should not have been out in the cold like that." Heartpaw didn't have the strength or will to answer. He didn't want this Clan life anymore. He wanted to live with Ivypaw somewhere where the sun would always shine. Where they could have a warm den at night and good hunting. But that was impossible. Lionbreeze spotted Cindertail and him and padded over to them.

"What happened?" he asked. He checked Heartpaw.

"I don't know. I found him like these. He seems tired," Cindertail said. Lionbreeze nodded and led Heartpaw into the medicine den. Heartpaw shivered. He suddenly felt cold to the bone. He wondered if he had greencough.

"You don't have greencough," said Lionbreeze as if reading Heartpaw's mind. He made Heartpaw lay in one of the nests in the medicine cat dens. "Here, take some Feverfew." Heartpaw opened his mouth and chewed on it numbly. "Were you running?" Heartpaw managed a weak nod. Lionbreeze sighed.

"Why are you trying to make my job harder?" Lionbreeze said. "Take some ivy to soothe you. And get some rest. You aren't to go outside till I tell you. Understood? I don't want anybody else getting greencough. It's complicated as it is." Heartpaw stared at the ivy. His thought flitted to Ivypaw. He was sure she would be able to cure her. Then Lionbreeze stuck his head back in the den.

"Sandwing wants to talk to you. But I'm not allowing you to go out. So I'll tell her to come in," Lionbreeze told Heartpaw. Heartpaw nodded weakly. He wondered what Sandiwng would want to tell him. He closed his eyes and waited. Finally, Sandwing appeared. She didn't look sick. She looked like her grumpy and strict self.

"Heartpaw,"she said. Heartpaw grimaced. She didn't come near him. She sat at the medicine den entrance. There were a few awkward moments.

"Lionbreeze says my greencough is finished," said Sandwing at last. "I don't doubt him but I have this feeling. That I'm going to die soon." Heartpaw wanted to laugh. She was being so serious.

"You laugh. But I mean it. I don't know why... I just wanted to tell you. About Brightheart," Sandwing said. Heartpaw's eyes locked on her. Now he was really listening.

"Did Stormpelt ever talk to you about her?" asked Sandwing. Heartpaw didn't say anything. "Probably not. It hurt him too much didn't it? I was surprised he was so sad." Heartpaw frowned. Of course Stormpelt was sad. He loved Brightheart.

"Ah. Of course, you don't know," said Sandwing. What was she trying to tell Heartpaw. "I knew Brightheart. She was my best friend as a matter of fact. We were so close. One day, I fell in love. With this proud, strong and loyal cat. Stormpelt. We were a couple. And Brightheart was so happy for me. Little did I know, she and Stormpelt loved each other. Stormpelt loved her more than me apparently. And I was there, thinking Stormpelt loved me. But he loved my best friend. And she loved him. And she didn't tell me, of course not. At some point, I found out. I was so angry. And we got into a fight." Sandwing took a raspy breath. Heartpaw suddenly realised how old she was. He frowned. He didn't like her. But he didn't want her to die.

"We both knew Stormpelt loved Brightheart. So I let him go. And they were happy, for a while. Until Brightheart found out Stormpelt acted like he did to her to another cat, Gingerfern. Brightheart of course, was heart broken. She had loved him with all his heart. And I hated him. I hated him for driving us into a fight and then breaking my best friend's heart. So he went on and they were mates, Gingerfern and him. I still loathed him and so did Brightheart, at least, I thought she did. And one day, she died. Gingerfern. It was WindClan. There was a fight at the border and Gingerfern died. We will never know how. Anyways, Stormpelt then suddenly turned to Brightheart. And he told her he loved her. I was incredulous. How could he? He loved Gingerfern and abandoned Brightheart for Gingerfern. Then he says he still loved Brightheart. I hated him and I was sure Brightheart did to, I was sure she was going to tell him to go, to ignore him. But it turned out she wasn't as mad at him as she told me. She fell into his spell once more. And of course, they became mates. I was so mad at him. I tried to talk sense to Brightheart. But she ignored me. Even spat at me and told me what a bad friend I was. But the only reason I was mad at Stormpelt was because he hurt Brightheart. So she stopped talking to me. And then, she died kitting you. And I thought Stormpelt would move on. But for some reason, he stayed with you and Brightheart. I don't know why. I thought he'd move on. Like he did with Gingerfern. She loved him so much and after she died, all he did was set vigil for her and the next morning he turned to Brightheart. Oh well." Heartpaw frowned.

"You didn't tell me about her," said Heartpaw finally.

"What do you mean?" asked Sandwing.

"You told me you were going to tell me about Brightheart," Heartpaw managed to say.

"Ah. Yes. I did. She was beautiful. She was nice, kind, strong, loyal. And funny. She would cheer anybody up. Maybe that's why Stormpelt stayed loyal to her. He didn't stay loyal to me or poor Gingerfern. And we used to talk about having kits. We said we would raise them together. We promised each other. She said she'd love to have a tom and a she-cat. And I said I'd rather have two she-cats," Sandwing said. Heartpaw nodded. Lionbreeze poked his head in.

"Sandwing. You need to rest and Heartpaw, you too," said Lionbreeze. "No going out, understand?" Heartpaw and nodded as Sandwing slipped out quietly. He frowned and thought over what he had been told. He could chose to ignore what Sandwing had said but he knew she was being honest.

# Ch. 49

Heartpaw woke up to find his throat sore. But he wanted to see Ivypaw. He looked out of the medicine den. The sun was just setting. Lionbreeze had specifically told him not to go out but he felt stronger now. And it was just going to be for a while. Plus he wasn't going to be running. He'd be resting on the ground, talking to Ivypaw. He slowly crawled up. The camp clearing was empty. There was some commotion and talking at the elders den and talking in the warrior's den but nobody was in sight. Heartpaw rushed out of camp and took a deep breath. He slipped into the shadows and started making his way towards WindClan border. He finally found reached. He peered through the grass and spotted Ivypaw, she was already waiting for him. He felt suddenly relaxed and much better. Her eyes were immediately worried.

"You don't look too good," she said then ran through the Thunderpath and pushed her pelt near Heartpaw.

"I feel fine," assured Heartpaw, shivering from the cold. Ivypaw pressed herself against him and they shared each others warmth.

"I thought you wouldn't be here today. I really needed to see you. Salmontail died... He was one of our elders. He was so nice and gentle....," Ivypaw trailed off. Heartpaw didn't know what to say so he licked her gently on the snout.

"We've had a few deaths too...," whispered Heartpaw. "I don't know... I feel kinda lost. I've never been in this kind of chaos before."

"Me neither. I thought leaf-bare would be all snow and playing but it's mostly death and sicknesses," sighed Ivypaw then she looked at Heartpaw seriously. "You promise you won't get sick. Please."

"I promise. And you too," said Heartpaw. Ivypaw nodded

and leaned her head against his. He wrapped his tail around her. They were both lost in each others warmth. There was a gentle rustling behind them. Suddenly, there was a low growl. Ivypaw and Heartpaw sprang to their feet. Lionbreeze stood behind them, eyes glazed in anger.

"So you've been with a WindClan cat all this time?" he snarled. "You tell my sister you don't love her and cast her away because you love a *WindClan* cat?" Ivypaw backed away. Heartpaw didn't know what to do. His eyes wide in panic, he turned to Ivypaw.

"Go," he whispered. Lionbreeze didn't wait for anything, he launched himself at Heartpaw. Heartpaw was caught off guard and the wind was knocked out of him. He coughed and Lionbreeze sunk his claws into his side. Heartpaw cried out in pain.

"Lionbreeze!" he gasped. He rolled away and jumped to his paws, facing the medicine cat. Lionbreeze's eyes flashed with anger. His teeth barred, he snarled menacingly.

"You chose a WindClan cat over my sister?" accused Lionbreeze, full of hatred.

"I didn't mean to hurt her," cried Heartpaw. Ivypaw stepped in next to him. She crouched and growled.

"Get away from him," she snarled.

"Ivypaw, go now. We both know this is a mess. Go," said Heartpaw desperately.

"This psycho is attacking you," hissed back Ivypaw.

"I'm the psycho?" he said. "Look who you're talking to. You're both traitors to your Clan!"

"Ivypaw go now!" snapped Heartpaw. "You're making this worst." Ivypaw hesitated but the look in Heartpaw's eyes drove her away.

"You are going to pay for this," hissed Lionbreeze. "You had

no right to hurt Honeypaw."

"I never told Honeypaw we were mates. It was all in her head," replied Heartpaw. "It isn't my fault."

"It would have been ok. I was willing to forgive you for doing that to her but you chose a WindClan cat over my sister. That's not forgivable," hissed Lionbreeze and he launched himself onto Heartpaw. Heartpaw dodged, knowing Lionbreeze had no fighting practice but he was driven by hatred and anger. Heartpaw unsheathed his claws. His whole world was being thrown upside down. All he had done was love a cat.

"Even if I don't manage to get enough damage as I would like on you, Pinestar will give you a suitable punishment," Lionbreeze grinned. He then raked his front paw out and caught Heartpaw on the chest. Heartpaw growled and leapt. He sunk his claws into Lionbreeze's fur and he tasted sweet blood. He clawed harder and harder then Lionbreeze threw him to the ground and knocked the wind out of him. Lionbreeze pinned Heartpaw down and clawed at his sides. Heartpaw rolled away, panting heavily then he felt Lionbreeze sink his teeth into his neck and he was dragged away. His muscles ached. He knew he hadn't recovered from whatever sickness he had had before. His brain was tired and felt mushy. The world around him swirled in black and white and still, he was dragged. Finally, they pushed into the ShadowClan camp. Lionbreeze let go off him and he was left in silence for a while. Then there were voices. Voices which swirled in his mind and echoed far away. He was aware of Pinestar, Lionbreeze and Cindertail's voices. He forced his eyes open. A crowd was gathered around him but they kept a distance as if unsure about him. Slowly, he got up into a sitting position. He noticed Sandwing's eyes on him. Disappointment reflected in her eyes and he suddenly felt very ashamed. Pinestar padded over to him. He felt even more ashamed. Pinestar had chosen to mentor *him* and he had failed. Pienstar's face was unreadable and passive.

"Is it true? What Lionbreeze says?" Pinestar interrogated. Lionbreeze watched, his eyes deadly. Blood dripped from his sides. Heartpaw was aware of his wounds but he didn't care.

"What did he say?" Heartpaw found the strength to ask. Pinestar, for a moment, looked a bit proud and hopeful.

"That you have been meeting with a WindClan she-cat," Pinestar said, his voice echoing clearly around the clearing. Heartpaw heard a sharp gasp and a few mumbles. Lionbreeze pounced to his feet. Heartpaw turned to see Honeypaw, backing away, her eyes clouded. He was filled with deeper shame and guilt. Lionbreeze gave Heartpaw a look of pure hatred and turned to Honeypaw and helped her away.

"Yes...," whispered Heartpaw. Pinestar's eyes turned dark and the hope was extinguished.

"You will be punished for your actions," said Pinestar. Heartpaw hung his head but nodded. Cindertail stepped forward.

"I know it is not you to betray your Clan, Heartpaw," said Cindertail. "And maybe you were young and foolish and didn't understand the consequences. Maybe, your mentor didn't tell you about the warrior code." She gave Pinestar a stern look and he glared back at her.

"Are you questioning me?" he hissed.

"Yes," she said firmly. He turned to Heartpaw.

"I may not have told you about the warrior code. But you must have known it is forbidden to have a relationship with a cat from another Clan," Pinestar said. Heartpaw nodded. "Your punishment shall be isolation. You are too young to be banished and I know Cindertail is right about you being young and foolish and not thinking your actions through. So, for ten days you will stay away from ShadowClan but in its territory. You will not go near the WindClan *or* ThunderClan border. And you will fend for yourself. At ten days, I will send a warrior to get you. And you will be confined to camp unless you are on a hunting patrol or border patrol. You will not be allowed to go out to hunt alone or just for a walk. And then, we'll see to your training later on." Heartpaw gulped and nodded sadly. It was too cold. How was he going to survive? He was just an apprentice. He had never learnt to hunt in winter and

he had not been training for more and a moon as Pinestar was too busy. He sighed. Pinestar then called for Lionbreeze. Lionbreeze walked forward, barring his teeth at Heartpaw.

"Take care of his wounds," ordered Pinestar. Lionbreeze smirked.

"As if," he spat. "I would never."

"He'll die alone with these wounds. Heal him," Pinestar said once more.

"Never," hissed Lionbreeze.

"You will. You attacked him and you will take care of his wounds. Then he will get the punishment he deserves," Pinestar said. Lionbreeze growled under his breath but left to get herbs for Heartpaw. He brought them out, refusing to let Heartpaw into the medicine den and started taking care of Heartpaw's wounds. Heartpaw avoided eye contact and kept his eyes fixed to the ground. Finally, Lionbreeze deemed finished and stomped away.

"Go back to your duties!" ordered Pinestar to the gathered cats. Then he turned to Cindertail. "Follow him out, make sure he is far away enough from camp and that he goes deeper into the forest, not nearer to ThunderClan or WindClan territory. Cindertail nodded. Pinestar gave Heartpaw one more look and walked off. Cats glared at him and scorned him. Sandwing stopped him near the entrance.

"You're no better than Stormpelt. Breaking cats hearts because you feel like it," she growled. Heartpaw bowed his head, he didn't know what to say. Firpaw stood next to his mother and Heartpaw looked at him, knowing he was going to see hatred and anger in his eyes but he only saw sadness and pity. Heartpaw thought that maybe Firpaw wasn't that bad after all, it was Lionbreeze. He sighed as he trailed after Cindertail. When they exited camp, she let him lead the way. He walked on, away from WindClan territory. He had no will to go back anyways.

"You need to find a warm place to sleep," Cindertail told him.

"And you need to hunt everyday and make sure to drink. The first thing you need to worry about is shelter." Heartpaw didn't know why she was telling him this but he listened. He didn't want to die.

"You think it's strange I'm trying to help you?" Cindertail asked. Heartpaw nodded. "I know you didn't mean harm to the Clan. You thought you could love a cat from another Clan and still be loyal to your Clan. And I still think you're the same cat you used to be. You're still loyal. You're still brave and skilful. I still see potential in you. So don't give up yet." Heartpaw didn't know what to say so he didn't say anything.

"You're on your own for now. Remember what I said," Cindertail told him. And she turned around and padded away. Heartpaw looked around. He was in the middle of the forest. Each tree cast dangerous shadows around. He slunk into the shadows and walked and walked. He didn't want to find a shelter. He wanted to go back to camp and sleep in his nest with Hoenypaw and Firpaw. He still had a hope that Pinestar might come and get him but as the night got colder and darker, the hope was extinguished. He stopped trudging and found a small, fallen log. He crawled inside. It was cold but kept the wind out. He curled his tail around himself, tired. He didn't care that it was uncomfortable and that even the inside was frozen, at least he was away from the relentless wind. He shivered but the harsh wind lulled him to sleep.

# Ch. 50

Heartpaw woke up numb. His back was covered in drops of snow. He shuffled in the log and crawled out. The ground was covered in thick snow. He took a step and his foot sunk into the cold snow and made a soft noise. He needed food. He padded forward, making loud noises in the snow. He spotted something from the corner of his eye. There was a small hole in a tree bark. He clawed at it and sniffed inside. He put his claw in and brought out something. A frozen lizard. It was better than nothing. He gobbled it up in a single gulp and continued on his way. He scared away a few swallows but didn't see anything else. It was afternoon when he finally gave up and remembered what Cindertail had said. Shelter. Food. Water. Right then, his throat was sore and thirsty. He made his way slowly towards the stream. It was frozen. He pressed his paw onto the cold ice. It wasn't too hard. With all his strength, he brought down his two front paws onto the ice and it broke. Under the thick layer of ice, trickles just a bit of water. He lapped it up quickly then returned to his log. He knew the log wasn't much of a shelter and scouted the area for another place to sleep. He had been around ShadowClan countless times but he had never thought about finding shelters anywhere out of camp. He sighed, he should have been more observant. Finally, he found himself near the Carrionplace. His mouth watered at the thought of rats. But then he remembered their red eyes and their sharp teeth and claws and shivered at the thought. But he was starving and the place was gigantic with many places to hide..., and sleep. Against his instincts, he crept into the Carrionplace. He wandered about, hearing the scuttling of rats and making sure not to get too near any place they might jump out at him. He wandered further into the Carrionplace, not spotting anywhere he could sleep in. The place was teeming with rats. Suddenly, a rat scuttled in front of him. It scared him for a moment. It was large with big beady eyes and pointed teeth. But hunger took over and he pounced on it. It squeaked and twisted. Heartpaw was surprised by its strength and saw it opening its mouth to bite onto Heartpaw. Quickly, he bit into its neck and tasted blood. He hung on to make sure it was dead and finally, he

let it go. It was limp and fell to the ground. Sighing in relief, he took a big bite. It was juicy and tasty. The best thing he had had for moons. He smiled, maybe it was better living in isolation then he grimaced, of course not, he was an outsider and his whole Clan was disappointed and disgusted in him. He finished the rat and, with a full stomach, walked forward. In the distance, he spotted something. A twoleg den. Curious but mostly frustrated at not finding anything, he advanced. He leapt over a fence and onto some dead grass. He looked up at the biggest thing he had ever seen. He crept out to some sort of opening and leapt into it. The Twoleg den was big and spacious. He smelt cat. Suddenly, he heard hissing. He spun around to see a cream coloured cat with angry eyes.

"Trespassing," jeered the cat. "You must be one of those Clan kitties." Heartpaw crouched and growled. He didn't want to fight. He wouldn't survive alone with wounds he couldn't heal himself.

"I'm sorry. I'll go," Heartpaw said, hating himself for being a coward. The cat sneered.

"You ain't going nowhere," he said. Heartpaw frowned, confused. Then a cat appeared behind the cream coloured cat. Rio.

"Rio!" gasped Heartpaw. The cream coloured cat turned around, pelt bristling.

"You know him?" he said.

"We're acquainted. I hunted for his entire Clan once. He owes me," smiled Rio. He padded forward. "What are you doing here?" Heartpaw was so relieved to see a cat he knew he couldn't help but smile.

"I- er, I was looking for a place to stay," said Heartpaw. He didn't know Rio was a kittypet but he didn't say anything.

"This is our home. An abandoned human's house," informed Rio.

"Human? House?" echoed Heartpaw.

"Whatever. Get out," hissed the cream coloured cat.

"Hey there Cole, calm down," Rio said with a beam. "We help cats in need. Now tell me Heartpaw, why are you looking for a place to stay?"

"I'm in... isolation," Heartpaw said.

"Right," Rio said slowly. "Well, if you're going to stay with us, we do expect you to help and you owe me double now." Heartpaw nodded.

"This is Cole by the way," Rio nodded to the unfriendly cat who swivelled around and marched away. "He's got a temper." Rio laughed and beckoned Heartpaw forward.

"Come along. I'm sure we have room," Rio said brightly and led him up some sort of wooden beam. The turned into a large room covered in some sort of soft bedding. Heartpaw's eyes shone.

"Yes, nice isn't it?" Rio said. "Now, you can't expect us to let you stay without a price. You will hunt rats for all of us. We are ten to be precise. And I need help for a little favour. You will help me." Heartpaw took not time to agree. Rio smiled.

"Then settle down then. I'll bring the others in so you can meet them," said Rio sweetly and padded away. Heartpaw collapsed on the soft ground. He heard some talking then Rio returned into the room with Cole and eight other cats. Two were slim and skinny and the others muscled well built.

"See here mates, this is Heartpaw," Rio announced. A ginger cat bristled.

"Heartpaw?" she laughed. "So he comes from the Clans..? What happened to them for them to start naming their kits Heartpaw? What Clan are you *Heartpaw*?" Heartpaw didn't like the tone of the ginger cat but he tried to keep his cool.

"ShadowClan," replied Heartpaw. Rio bit his lip unsure and the ginger cat bristled.

"ShadowClan...," she hissed. "Oh my beloved Clan."

"Anyways, Heartpaw this is Toby," Rio interrupted nodding to one of the sleek black cats.

"Wait, I'm not finished yet. How is your Clan then? Thriving? How many kits does Stormpelt have?" she smirked.

"You know him?" Heartpaw frowned. His mind was whirling. Who was she? He had a feeling he should know.

"Oh yes, he used to tell me he loved me," said the cat looking into the distance then her eyes turned cloudy and angry. Heartpaw realised she was older than she let on. "Gingerfern by the way. Nice to meet you." Heartpaw gaped.

"I see you know me," smiled Gingerfern.

"Sandwing talked to me about you," said Heartpaw.

"Oh yes..., *Sandwing*," sighed Gingerfern. "The loyal friend to Brightheart wasn't she."

"Brightheart was my mother," said Heartpaw suddenly. Gingerfern barred her teeth.

"And who was your father? Stormpelt? Did he leave her for another cat then?" hissed Gingerfern.

"No!" cried Heartpaw. "He loved Brightheart. he was loyal. He took care of me!"

"He did, didn't he?" sighed Gingerfern looking bitter. "But he left you?"

"He died," Heartpaw replied.

"Ahh, right," Gingerfern nodded. "Anyways, I'll be going now. Make sure to catch three rats for me. I do like rats. I really do." Rio nodded as Gingerfern slipped away. Cole huffed and trotted after her.

"Well that was interesting," said a light brown cat. "Hades, nice to meet you."

"Yes, I've never seen Gingerfern so bitter before," smiled a she-cat with white fur. "I'm Lily by the way." The other cats eyed him suspiciously but Rio introduced them to Heartpaw. A black tom was called Boo, another white and black tom was Tristan, there was a small tabby cat called Jasmine and a strong and dark coloured cat named Lavender. Then they all left. Rio eyed Heartpaw for a while then nodded.

"I would start hunting if I were you. If you don't get enough rats to feed them, they're a pretty grumpy bunch. And how long will you be staying?" asked Rio.

"Nine nights," Heartpaw replied.

"Good. Then on the second night, you will come with me for this little favour," Rio said, smile and walked away. Heartpaw watched him go slightly confused but then got up. He needed to hunt for some mean looking cats.

# Ch. 51

Heartpaw had no idea how he was to hunt for ten cats without getting bitten my a rat. He wanted to go back to camp, go back to his nest. He hadn't realised he'd miss normal ShadowClan days so much. He shivered in the cold. Heartpaw took a deep breath as he padded through the Carrionplace. He spotted a large rat scuttle by. It eyed him angrily then hissed. He took a step back. He remembered how mad Pinestar had been when he had come to the Carrionplace to hunt.

"You shouldn't have come," said a smooth voice. Heartpaw leapt back. He saw Lavender, watching him with sly eyes. Her gaze sent shivers down his spine.

"I didn't have anywhere else to go. Don't worry, I'll hunt enough for all of you," assured Heartpaw slightly nervous.

"You shouldn't have come," repeated the cat. "Once you join, there's no leaving."

"What do you mean?" Heartpaw said. "I'm only staying for nine nights, don't worry."

"Oh I'm not worried, you should be," she said and tilted her head. "I used to live with humans." Heartpaw cocked his head.

"Twolegs are humans. You better get used to that," Lavender said. Heartpaw nodded quickly. "I used to have a warm home. And one day, I decided it would be nice to go out and further away from my human's house to see a bit more of the world. Maybe even hunt for myself. I found myself lost and then some cats started a fight with me. Rio and Gingerfern helped me." Heartpaw nodded.

"Well that's just great for you then," Heartpaw said, not understanding her point.

"I'm not finished," Lavender said. "They brought me back here, gave me some place to sleep. And I thanked them, asked them how I could repay them. And they said they had a little task for me. And I did the task but somehow, I got caught up in their trap. You see, once you owe them something, you owe them for life. They'll somehow make you feel as if you owe them something when you don't. And I've been trapped here, trying to pay off the debt."

"For how long?" asked Heartpaw.

"Months, years probably," Lavender said. Heartpaw looked at her without saying anything. "Ugh, months are moons and years are... I don't know what you call years."

"So you've been trying to repay them because they saved you from some cats and let you stay at their Twoleg den for a night? And you've been doing this for moons?" Heartpaw summarised. Lavender nodded.

"Wow, you're not doing a very good job," Heartpaw finally said.

"You don't get it," sighed Lavender in exasperation. "I've been trying to repay them, they always have something which keeps me here, and you too." Heartpaw frowned. Rio was nice. He caught mice for his whole Clan because he was nice. Right?

"Rio is nice," Heartpaw said.

"You better start hunting," Lavender said, turning tail. Heartpaw watched her slowly walk away.

"Do you have anything to do?" called Heartpaw.

"No," replied Lavender.

"Can you help me hunt?" asked Heartpaw.

"Don't ask anybody anymore for favours," said Lavender and slipped away. Confused, but mostly frustrated, Heartpaw marched into the middle of the Carrionplace. Taking a deep breath, he crept forward, pricking his ears to listen for rats. He spotted a

tail, near the the corner of some sort of metal thing. He crept forward. Suddenly, the tail jerked and the rat turned his head to Heartpaw. Without thinking, Heartpaw jumped at it. The rat saw him coming and squeaked angrily. Heartpaw sunk his claws into the rat's back and tail. It squirmed and twisted around. Its eyes locked with Heartpaw's red and bulging. Heartpaw was surprised for a moment until a sharp pain erupted on his leg. He cried out in pain and the rat jumped back from his grasp. But it didn't flee. It watched him, silently, a few paces away. Heartpaw looked down at a small bite on his foot. A drop of blood dropped down. He closed his eyes in horror. He turned away from the rat and limped towards the Twoleg den. He reached an opening and crawled in. He started making his way up until he found the room with the soft floor. Rio was resting on the ground and looked up when Heartpaw entered. He smiled but he was hiding something behind the smile.

"Heartpaw, finished?" he asked cheerily. Heartpaw shook his head.

"A rat bit me," he said. He remembered what Lavender had said.

"Oh no," Rio frowned and got up. He peered at Heartpaw's paw closely. "I know a cat who can help you. But he's a long way off and he'll demand for things. And I had something to do just now, so I don't have time to bring you so I'm gonna have to ask Boo but he won't be happy. He's busy as well. But I'll do it for you." Heartpaw nodded in relief. Rio nodded and told him to rest for a while. Rio then raced out of the room, leaving Heartpaw to lie on the soft ground, waiting. Finally, Rio returned with Boo who looked grumpy.

"Ugh, now?" he muttered. Rio nodded then smiled at Heartpaw.

"Good luck," he said. Heartpaw nodded and followed Boo out. Boo muttered underneath his breath as he led Heartpaw through some sort of dark alleyway. The smells were strong and putrid but Heartpaw smelt prey and strong delicious scents he had never smelt before. He followed Boo through what he thought as a Twoleg camp with many Twoleg dens.

"Did you catch rats for us?" Booo asked angrily.

"Ummm, I got bitten," Heartpaw pointed out.

"Yes, I know," Boo growled. "So you were supposed to pay your part but instead, you're causing more trouble." Heartpaw felt a sting of guilt. He hung his head.

"Sorry," he murmured. Suddenly, a white fluffy cat appeared in front of them. This was exactly how Heartpaw imagined a kittypet. The kittypet barred his teeth and Heartpaw almost laughed. It looked funny, with its fur puffy and soft. Its eyes caught Heartpaw's.

"You think this is funny?" said the cat.

"What?" Heartpaw said, caught off guard, he choked back a laugh. "No of course not."

"Shut up Paw," hissed Boo.

"Hey! That's not my name!" Heartpaw protested. Boo turned around and hissed.

"Sorry Shadow...., he didn't mean it," Boo apologised to the fluffy cat. Shadow chuckled then his eyes turned dark and serious.

"What do you want?" he asked. "And if it's to help that thing-" Shadow nodded to Heartpaw. "Then no." Boo let out a small sigh of exasperation and shot Heartpaw a look.

"Well, he didn't mean it," Boo said. "He's just a stupid little furball and Rio would really appreciate if you could just bring us to Tide."

"If you think I'm brining *him* there, oh no," hissed Shadow. Heartpaw suddenly felt as if the kittypet was not as soft as he looked.

"Shadow, just let us see him," said Boo. "Please." Shadow narrowed his eyes.

"What happened?" he asked, looking at Heartpaw's bite.

"A rat bit him," explained Boo.

"Then he'll have a slow and painful death, goodbye," smiled Shadow and slipped away. Boo turned to Heartpaw and hissed. He lashed his tail angrily.

"Why'd do you have to mess everything up?" he snapped. "You're wasting out time and things we've worked hard for." Heartpaw didn't say anything. He didn't want to die.

"Shadow," called Boo. "I'll get whatever you want." Shadow appeared on a ledge above them. He sat down and licked his right paw.

"Mmm?" questioned Shadow. Boo looked up.

"I'll bring you a *hot dog*," Boo said finally. Shadow burst into a smile and waved his tail. He leapt down from the edge.

"Follow along," he said brightly. Boo and Heartpaw followed Shadow down the alley and into another abandoned Twoleg den. It was darker and more sinister and sent shivers down Heartpaw's spine. He didn't dare ask Boo what a "hot dog" was, he didn't dare say anything.

"Tiiiiide," called Shadow in a sing song voice. A light brown cat appeared.

"What?" he asked flatly.

"I've got visitors," grinned Shadow and he pranced off. Boo and Heartpaw faced Tide. He watched them carefully. Tide then slipped away, leaving them alone. Boo sat down and eyed Heartpaw with distaste. Heartpaw didn't ask Boo anything, he didn't want to mess up anymore. Tide returned with some sort of herbs clutched in his mouth. He took Heartpaw's paw without a word and pressed some sort of poultice onto it.

"What's that?" asked Heartpaw finally after some moments of tension. He watched as the stranger applied some sort of herb on

his bite.

"Ah, he talks," exclaimed Tide. "It's Burdock." Heartpaw didn't know what it was but he had heard Lionbreeze talking about it and it made his nerves calm down. Lionbreeze. He shuddered at the thought of the medicine cat's eyes filled with hatred.

"There you go," Tide said then turned Boo. "You'll be paying Shadow what he asks." Then he walked away. Boo snorted and slunk out. Heartpaw quickly trotted after him. They made their way back towards Rio's Twoleg den.

"Thanks," murmured Heartpaw. "I'll hunt as much as I can tomorrow to pay you guys back."

"Oh, you owe us way more than that," growled Boo then leapt away. Heartpaw found himself in front of the Twoleg den. He slipped inside and climbed up to the room with the soft floor. Lavender and Gingerfern were there. Gingerfern eyed him with her piercing green eyes.

"Got bitten by a rat?" she said. "I haven't eaten today. Now I gotta hunt for myself." She growled. Heartpaw looked down. They had given him a place to stay and he wasn't being very helpful in return. Lavender looked away.

"Tomorrow you better do better," said Gingerfern. Heartpaw wanted to ask her why she was here. She was supposed to be dead but he didn't want to cause more trouble. He sighed, thinking about his Clan. His thought flickered to Ivypaw. Why couldn't he be loyal to ShadowClan but still love Ivypaw?

# Ch. 52

"So what are we supposed to eat?" snarled Hades.

"Yeah? You come here and we give you shelter and you give us more trouble than we already have," growled Cole. Heartpaw looked at his paws in embarrassment, shame and guilt.

"I am disappointed, I really am," sighed Rio, padding up to Heartpaw. He felt even more shame. Somehow, he did not want Rio to be disappointed in him. Lavender slipped in beside Rio and Hades.

"Leave him, did we really expect him to catch enough rats for us?" Lavender said, eyeing Heartpaw. He looked away from her.

"Yes," Rio replied. "Afterall, I hunted for his whole Clan while he watched. He should know by now how to hunt rats."

"I'm really sorry, I'll go now if you want," Heartpaw managed.

"It's too late," Rio said. "But tomorrow you will." Heartpaw nodded. "Right, everybody, leave him, we'll sleep with empty bellies tonight." Tristan growled and glared at Heartpaw as he walked by. Heartpaw crawled to the corner and curled his tail around him. Although it was warm and the cold wind was kept out, he felt lonely and mostly, homesick. He wondered what his Clan was doing. They were probably doing just fine without him. He closed his eyes and heard someone pad to his side. Lavender lay down next to him.

"You really messed up didn't you?" she whispered. Heartpaw sighed.

"I know, I'm sorry, everybody's been telling me that, I get it," Heartpaw replied getting slightly annoyed.

"That's not what I meant," Lavender said. "I tried to warn you. You owe them loads now."

"Yes, I know that," Heartpaw said.

"Be careful," said Lavender finally. "Don't mess up again."

"Yeah, I'm sorry," huffed Heartpaw. "How many times do I have to say it?"

"I'm not mad," assured Lavender. "I caught my own food although the others didn't." Heartpaw lay his head in his paws. He wanted to go back to his Clan. He didn't care if they glared at him or if Lionbreeze attacked him, he felt out of place here. Nobody liked him and he didn't understand half of the words they used. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep but although he was warm and the cold was kept out, he couldn't sleep. He shuffled positions. Nothing seemed comfortable.

"Would you quit it!" snapped Tristan. Heartpaw mumbled an apology and tried to stop moving but his whole body itched. He got up, hoping this wouldn't anger them. Tristan and Hades shot him angry looks but didn't ask him anything as he slipped out. Outside, the cold bit into Heartpaw's fur. Snow blew wildly around. Soon, snow clung to his fur and he felt frozen but he kept going. The cold seemed to refresh him. He walked deeper into the Carrionplace. He didn't see or hear any rats. He forced his way to the gate. He didn't care if he couldn't go back to camp but he wanted to be in his territory. As he crawled through the small hole in the fence, somebody blocked him. He stumbled back onto the icy ground.

"Where are you going in this weather?" asked Rio, peering at him. Heartpaw relaxed in relief. It was just Rio.

"Nowhere, I was just going back to my territory..., I just...," Heartpaw didn't get to finish. Rio beckoned him back towards the Twoleg den with his tail.

"Come on," he said.

"I just wanna go back to my territory. I wanna see it," whimpered Heartpaw. He didn't have any intention of getting further from his territory. He wanted to be as close to camp as he could. Rio looked at him for a while then approached. He pressed his face close to Heartpaw's.

"Are you coming back?" he asked.

"I don't know..., I'm really sorry I didn't hunt for you but I didn't stay a night and I'm going now," Heartpaw said. But he was sure, he wasn't coming back.

"No, you still have to repay us, you owe us," said Rio. Heartpaw took a step back. The wind howled in his ears.

"I will but I won't stay with you guys...," Heartpaw said.

"No. How am I supposed to know if you're not going to just leave and never come back?" Rio said.

"I promise. I swear," begged Heartpaw. Rio cocked his eyebrow.

"You're not going anywhere till you repay us," he said firmly then led Heartpaw back towards the Twoleg den. Heartpaw stopped in his tracks. He was a warrior.., well an apprentice but he knew how to fight. Rio stiffened beside him. Heartpaw lunged at Rio who sidestepped and pushed Heartpaw to the ground.

"Be careful," smiled Rio. Heartpaw shivered and he remembered Lavender's words. If Rio hurt him he'd need to get Tide to heal him which meant he would owe Rio even more. Heartpaw took a step back.

"Fine," he huffed. Rio nodded satisfied and led Heartpaw back into the Twoleg den. Heartpaw followed him up a step but Rio shook his head.

"We were going to give you shelter. But you tried to leave without paying us back. You'll stay down here till you repay us," Rio said sternly. Heartpaw felt anger flare through him but he relented and slipped to the corner of the dark room. The wind

howled outside and whistled in his ears. The ground was cold but not as cold as outside and the snow didn't reach him inside. He shuddered but closed his eyes to a troubled sleep.

# Ch. 53

"Wake up," whispered a voice. Heartpaw blinked his eyes open. His body was stiff but at least he wasn't frozen or dead. He cringed as he slowly got up.

"Waa?" he murmured. Lavender peered down at him.

"What time is it?" muttered Heartpaw, looking around. The place was quiet and a soft blanket of snow covered the ground outside.

"Way past noon," said Lavender. Heartpaw gaped. He jumped onto the windowsill.

"I haven't even started hunting yet," he wailed.

"Then get to it," Lavender said.

"Why didn't you wake me up earlier?" cried Heartpaw.

"I just got up," Lavender told him with a shrug.

"Why didn't the others wake me up?" Heartpaw said.

"What did I tell you about you owing them?" Lavender sighed. "If you slept through the day and didn't hunt for them, you'd owe them even more."

"Don't they want to eat?" muttered Heartpaw.

"They can easily hunt for themselves," Lavender explained. "And they need you for things they'd rather *not* do." Heartpaw frowned. Lavender was being confusing again. Couldn't she just talk normally. He snorted and leapt outside. A cold breeze blew on him. He shivered but made his way into the Carrionplace. He sniffed the air. It was still but he could still smell a lingering scent of rat. He heard the squeaking of rats and he spotted a few footsteps were the rats had run around in the snow. He hesitated, he didn't want to get

bit again.

"Watch," came a voice. Lavender. She slipped past him and through the snow, barely making any noise. Then she peered into a small hiding place. She crept next to it and positioned herself so she could see in without the rats seeing her. "Now, you can either be like Tristan, who will go in himself and get the rats. Or sane and smart like me, I'll wait till one comes out. Won't be long." Heartpaw watched and waited. Suddenly, two dark shapes scurried out. One stopped at the entrance and sniffed around and the other scrambled in the middle of a pile of snow. It was a dark spot in white snow and easy prey to see. Lavender pounced on the one near the entrance and Heartpaw leapt for the one in the snow. He clutched it in his jaws and without any mercy or hesitation, bit down as hard as he could. He bit down harder and harder, even when he heard a bone crunch and the rat's spine snap. Lavender padded to his side, rat in her jaw.

"You can let go, pretty sure it's dead," she murmured though the rat. Heartpaw dropped it with a sigh of relief. Lavender put down the rat next to his and he buried it in the snow.

"Where are you going?" asked Heartpaw as Lavender padded away.

"Why?" she snorted back a laugh. "It's none of your business, get hunting." Heartpaw frowned but nodded. He watched her walk away and leap over the fence. He still had many more rats to catch. He positioned himself like Lavender near another small shelter and waited.

"Ah, good job," Rio smiled. Heartpaw had piled up the rats near the big room with the soft floor, or what Rio called, the bedroom.

"Huh," snorted Gingerfern, snatching a rat in her jaws. She brought it to her corner and ate it in big gulps. Each cat regarded Heartpaw with a glare but served themselves to one or two rats. Finally, Lavender took one of the last rats. She nodded to Heartpaw in approval. One rat was left. Heartpaw bent down to take the evil looking thing in his jaw when Cole brushed past him and snatched

the mouse. Heartpaw almost growled but took a deep breath. He counted till ten. Rio, having finished his rat, padded up to Heartpaw.

"Why don't you sleep here tonight?" Rio boomed. "You've done well." Heartpaw grinned, forgetting that just the night before, he had tried to escape. He saw Lavender trying to catch his eye but he looked away. Gingerfern walked up to him and sat facing him.

"What happened to Stormpelt?" she asked.

"Why do you want to know?" asked Heartpaw which was a mistake. She brought out her paw on his head. He grunted and growled at Gingerfern.

"Don't talk to me like that," she hissed. "What happened?"

"He died fighting ThunderClan," muttered Heartpaw reluctantly.

"Oh? And did he ever.. mention me?" Gingerfern inquired, giving Heartpaw an indignant look when he opened his mouth to ask why she cared.

"Um, no not really," replied Heartpaw.

"What does that mean? It's a yes or no question."

"No."

"Did *anyone* ever mention me?"

"Sandwing."

"Ah yes, Sandwing. The loyal friend."

"She said you died. Because of WindClan."

"It is true, we were fighting WindClan. And I took my opportunity to escape. A few cats thought they saw me flee. I don't know what they all concluded in the end though, I was long gone."

"Why did you leave?"

"I'm asking the questions here. How is Riverclaw? Or should I say, Riverstar?"

"He's an elder," Heartpaw replied flatly. Gingerfern frowned and sighed.

"Never made it to leader then?" she said.

"I'm not sure. But Stormpelt was deputy," said Heartpaw.

"Ahh, mighty Strongpelt," said Gingerfern with a mad glint in her eyes.

"He chose Brightheart," Heartpaw pointed out unnecessarily.

"No, he chose me. But I *died,*" Gingerfern shot back. Heartpaw suppressed a growl.

"No, you ran away! And Stormpelt loved Brightheart and now they're both in Starclan and they're happy," Heartpaw said, raising his voice.

"Woah, chill," grinned Gingerfern. "Don't get so triggered.

"I'm not-" Heartpaw took a deep breath. "I'm not triggered."

"Ha, you should see your face right now," said Gingerfern. "Who's leader now?"

"Pinestar," answered Heartpaw grudgingly. This cat wasn't even in ShadowClan anymore.

"That wouldn't be Pineheart?"

"I don't know, alright? For as long as I've lived, Pinestar has been Pinestar."

"Getting triggered again. Who's deputy?"

"Cinderpelt."

"Ahh, little Cinderpaw," said Gingerfern, her eyes clouding. "I didn't ever think she'd even be made a warrior."

"She's really smart."

"Really?"

"Smarter than you," muttered Heartpaw under his breath. Gingerfern only smiled.

"Why are you in isolation?" asked Gingerfern. And there it was, the question Heartpaw had been dreading. He didn't want to talk about it.

"You've asked too many questions already," said Heartpaw, looking away.

"Alright, ask me a question and I'll answer it," Gingerfern said.

"How was it? ShadowClan before I was born. Stormpelt, Brightheart, Sandwing, Riverclaw," said Heartpaw. Gingerfern thought for a while and Heartpaw thought she wasn't going to ever answer his question.

"Let's start from the leader, did you know who our leader used to be?" Gingerfern finally said. Heartpaw shook his head. "Sparrowstar. He was a kind and loyal leader. Sometimes too kind. Riverclaw just became a warrior. I was an apprentice, which meant, Sandwing, Brightheart and Stormpelt were apprentices as well. Sandwing was rude. But only to those who annoyed her. Which used to be Stormpelt. Until one day, she fell in love with him. They were only apprentices. I, secretly had been watching Stormpelt for a while. He was closer with Brightheart and Sandwing though. Brightheart and Sandwing were best friends and they didn't seem to want me. So I just stayed their friend. So Sandwing, or Sandpaw and Stormpaw, both liked each other. Then, he turned to Brightheart instead. They had just become warriors, I think. I'm not

sure as they wouldn't let me on to anything, if I wanted to know, I had to find out myself. Which meant eavesdropping. Anyways, Sandwing was mad at Brightheart. And she started hanging out with me. Then one day, Stormpelt started acting, *nicer*. He was nice to me all the time till he told me he loved me and left Brightheart. I had had my eye on him for some time so of course I was all happy. And we were mates. Brightheart was heart broken. Sandwing was furious at Stormpelt. He had broken her best friend's heart. And one day..., I won't tell you why, I left camp. And I don't know what happened after. Nor do I care."

"Then why did you ask me so many questions?" asked Heartpaw. Gingerfern narrowed her eyes.

"Curiosity," she snapped. "Anyways, that's enough." She stormed off to another corner and left Heartpaw pondering about what she had said. He knew most of it as Sandwing had told him but he couldn't help thinking about why, she decided to leave.

# Ch. 54

"Heartpaw, wake up," someone said into Heartpaw's ear. He moved away and looked up at Rio. He groaned but slowly got up.

"What?" he asked.

"Remember that task I had for you?" Rio said.

"Yes but you didn't tell me what it was," huffed Heartpaw, feeling grumpy.

"Come," said Rio. He led Heartpaw to one of the openings, which Lavender had called a window. They jumped onto the sill and looked down at giant Twoleg dens. Rio jumped from the window sill onto another Twoleg den roof. He padded on the top on a pipe and turned to Heartpaw.

"Come on," Rio called. Heartpaw looked down. The drop was high. He gulped.

"Can't we walk from the ground?" Heartpaw said. Rio shook his head. Taking a deep breath, he crouched and launched himself onto the other side. He landed and balanced himself. Rio watched him then started running to the other side of the roof. Heartpaw ran after him. Soon, they had crossed at least five Twoleg dens. Finally, Rio stopped on the roof of the highest one and they watched the world below.

"See that house over there?" Rio asked. Heartpaw raked his mind for the word "house". Twoleg den. He nodded.

"Yeah," he said.

"You need to go in and get into the bedroom, into the cupboard and get the fluffy fake fur coat and bring it back," Rio

smiled. "Easy." Heartpaw frowned. He hadn't understood half of what Rio has said. Rio saw his confused look and sighed. He sat down.

"The bedroom is where the Twolegs sleep, or HUMANS," Rio explained. "The cupboard is where they keep their clothes, or pelts, if you like. A coat, is one of their types of pelts. One of their pelts in the cupboard is going to be very fluffy and you're going to get that. And bring it back." Heartpaw slowly understood and nodded slightly. He watched the den from above. It was quiet and there seemed to be no movement inside. Rio sighed.

"Look, inside, there will be stairs, which are like the ones in our house or den, if you go up, then the bedroom will be one of the rooms. Now go," Rio said. "I'll be back at sunset." Rio slipped away, leaving Heartpaw alone. How was he to trust Rio? He thought about running away. But he couldn't, could he? No. He'd just do this last thing for Rio, how hard could it be? He looked down and leapt onto one of the overflowing bins. He padded towards the house and crawled under a wire fence. He walked up to the front door and was happy to find that it was very badly protected. A small flap, slightly bigger than Heartpaw, let him slip in easily. He looked around. Different smells came to Heartpaw's nose. The smell of..., food, delicious food and dusty, murky smell. But mostly, Twoleg and... DOG! Heartpaw's fur rose. He could smell the sharp scent of dog. He sniffed harder. It was mostly to the left. He went to the room on the right. The floor was cold and white. The walls were white but there were some sort of High Stumps all around the wall. And there was a large white pressed onto the wall. It smelt strongly of food, although the food didn't smell fresh. The smell of food in there was overwhelming. He slipped into another room cautiously, looking around. The floor was brown now. He took careful steps as he passed another room. Inside, it was dark, he peered in and his eyes adjusted. There was some sort of large nest in the middle. He walked up to it and jumped onto the flat surface. But it wasn't hard. It was soft and comfortable. The room smelt of warmth and dust. He slipped away and suddenly, he heard something. A soft sniffling. Then some scratching. Then whimpering. He looked at a door in front of him. The noise was coming from inside. He looked up at a small metal stick on the

door. He frowned. He knew you had to push it somehow. He leapt at it and his paws scrambled at it but the door didn't move. There was a small whimper and more scrambling on the other side of the door. Heartpaw knew he probably shouldn't open the door but the curiosity was overwhelming. With one more leap, his paws pushed the metal thing down and the door swung open. He landed on the ground then heard some licking and heavy breathing. His eyes opened wide when he stared face to face with a white, fluffy creature. Heartpaw's mind raced. Dog! The dog's tail was wagging angrily and its tongue was lolling out of its mouth. Without thinking, Heartpaw raced off. The dog cocked his head then scampered after Heartpaw. Heartpaw raced into another room to find himself trapped. The creature raced to him, giving small barks. Heartpaw's heart raced. Then the dog pâwed Heartpaw amiably and licked him. Heartpaw shuddered and stood still. He took a deep gulp. Then he hissed angrily. His fur rose. The dog took a step back and started to whimper. Heartpaw ran away. He raced up some stairs and into another quiet room. A low growl resonated. He turned around and squeaked in fear. He leapt up and scrambled onto some wooden thing. He looked down at the biggest dog he'd ever seen (he'd only seen two dogs in his life, including the small one downstairs). It had brown and black fur and big brown eyes. It had a long tail and large paws. Heartpaw quivered on the wooden thing. The dog barked and growled. It snapped its jaws up at Heartpaw. Heartpaw stood still, rooted to the spot. Fear slowly swirled in his mind, taking over. The dog then jumped up, His front paws almost resting near Heartpaw. It brought its head to Heartpaw. Its jaws opened and a big growled resonated. It snapped at Heartpaw. Its teeth were long and sharp and his mouth wet with saliva. It flung itself angrily at Heartpaw's brown thing (which was a desk). Suddenly, there was some shouting. Twolegs. A hand grabbed the dog and the dog whimpered but glared at Heartpaw. Another Twoleg brought the dog outside. Then slammed the door and came back in. Then they both watched Heartpaw, murmuring to themselves. Heartpaw shivered with fear, watching the Twolegs with anticipation. His tail beneath his two hind legs.

"How did he get in here?" muttered one of the Twolegs, presumably a male.

"By the dog flap! I told you you didn't lock it. What if Charles had gone out?" replied the other, a female. Heartpaw shivered, watching them bark at each other, not understanding a word.

"I put him in the store room downstairs," said the male.

"What if Rose got out?" the female retorted.

"She was here with us," replied the male. "Why don't we look at the more pressing matter first? Like the cat in our house."

"Which you let in. And which Rose almost cut to pieces," muttered the female. The male grunted. He walked forward, hands extended. Heartpaw pressed himself further to the wall, shivering in fear. Slowly, the male took him in his hands. They were surprisingly gentle. Then the female took him in her arms. She was warm and had a flowery smell. He was calmed for a while, until they opened the room door and Rose bundled in. Her eyes fixed on Heartpaw and she gave a low growl. She opened her mouth to show Heartoaw her fangs but the male held onto some round thing around her neck. Heartpaw realised it was a collar. The female brought him downstairs where the white fluffy dog, Charles, started yapping at them happily. The female bent down to pet him and Heartpaw, seeing his chance to escape, leapt out of her arms and raced back into the white room and out the flap. He shot under the fence and pelted towards the Carrionplace. He heard somebody on his heels but he didn't care. He shot through the fence and into ShadowClan territory. He ran and ran till he found the river. He slopped to the ground. The gentle breeze and the snowy ground was a relief to him. The fresh scents of nature filled his nose, calming him. The song and chirping of birds were a relief to Heartpaw. He sat up. The fear slowly sapping away. He was never going back there. He sighed a sigh of relief to be back home. He stared at the frozen river until he realised someone had followed him. He looked up at Rio. Rio watched him, his stare intense.

"You didn't get it," he finally said.

"No, and I'm never going back there again. There were dog! You didn't tell me that!" accused Heartpaw, suddenly filled with

rage for the cat who had put him through the scariest moments of his whole life.

"No, because if I had, you wouldn't have gone," Rio said. Heartpaw's fur bristled.

"So you knew!" he cried. "How could you? Did you want me to die?"

"Relax," snorted Rio. "You're not dead, are you?" Heartpaw hissed.

"Get out of my territory," he growled. Rio didn't move.

"You still owe us and you will not leave until you have repaid us," Rio said firmly. Heartpaw growled and leapt at Rio. The tumbled through the soft snow. Rio batted at Heartpaw and he received a hard blow to his head but he clawed at Rio's sides until he drew blood. Suddenly, Rio threw him off and glared at him.

"You should not have done that," he growled. He crouched to leap at Heartpaw but suddenly, a brown cat flew into him and pinned him the ground. Thistlenose. Heartpaw sprung to his feet. Then three more cats appeared. Shadefern, Nightcloud and Spiderfur.

"Heartpaw?" murmured Shadefern. "Thank StarClan. You're no dead." Heartpaw frowned.

"No I'm not," he nodded, suddenly feeling awkward.

"What do we do with him?" asked Thistlenose. For a moment, Heartpaw thought he was talking about him until he realised they were talking about Rio.

"Let him go," shrugged Nightcloud. "Don't ever come back kittypet." Rio snarled and shot away.

"Come on," said Spiderfur, nodding to Heartpaw. He followed them, head bowed. Was his isolation over?

"We're going back to camp?" clarified Heartpaw.

"Yes," nodded Shadefern. He spotted their bramble tunnel further ahead and a dread filled him. What were his Clanmates going to think? He shuddered at the thought. Would they still cast him away. They entered camp. Everything seemed..., wrong. Maybe he'd been gone too long. Cindertail trotted up to him and nodded. A few other cats poked their heads out of their dens.

"You're alright!" Cindertail sighed. "We looked everywhere for you when we knew there was going to be a snowstorm but we couldn't find you."

"You looked for me?" frowned Heartpaw.

"Yes of course, you're still our Clanmate," Cindertail said.

"We wouldn't leave you to die," Shadefern said. "You just made a mistake."

"Wow um, thanks I guess," Heartpaw said. He suddenly felt much happier. "Where's Pinestar?" He hoped Pinestar would want to see him. Cindertail hung her head. Heartpaw was filled with dread once more. Did Pinestar not want to see him?

"Pinestar...," Cindertail broke off.

"It's Cinderstar," came a voice. Firpaw. Heartpaw looked up at him with uncertainty. Was he angry at him? Firpaw smiled at him. His gaze warm.

"Cinderstar?" Heartpaw murmured. "And Pinestar? Where's Pinestar?" Cinderstar sighed.

"Pinestar died, Heartpaw," Cinderstar said.

"What? Of greencough? ThunderClan?" cried Heartpaw.

"No..., peacefully," said Cinderstar. "He was old, Heartpaw. And he was on his last life." Heartpaw hung his head. Why did Pinestar have to die? He didn't even say goodbye. The last he had seen of Pinestar was when he threw him into isolation.

"Heartpaw, things here, are now, different," said Firpaw. "For

one, I'm Firfrost now. And Hoenypaw is Honeylight." Heartpaw nodded.

"That's great," he said. "Congratulations." Nightcloud turned to him.

"There's that but there's bad news too," Nightcloud said.

"Raggedscar, Sunwhisper, Birchstep, Dandilionfrost, Crowtail,Sandwing, Daisyfoot and Foxwhisker died....," Nightcloud said after a deep breath. Heartpaw gaped.

"Crowtail! Sandwing? Sunwhisper? ... Dandilionfrost...," he whispered. "But but Foxwhisker has kits!"

"Mosskit didn't make it," whispered Shadefern. What had happened to his Clan when he was gone? He should have been there for them. A cat slipped to them. It was Darkspeck.

"Hey, Heartpaw," said Darkspeck shyly. Heartpaw smiled back. Then more cats came to greet him till he felt wanted once more and he felt... at home. He slipped into the apprentice den. It was empty. He was the only one who would sleep there that night. He crawled out and spotted Honeypaw- Honeylight. She looked beautiful. He trotted up to her.

"Hey," he smiled. "I'm sorry. For everything. I messed up." She smiled at him. her smile warm as her fur. She brushed their pelts together, making Heartpaw's heart race. Only Ivypaw had made him feel like that.

"It's ok. I'm sorry too," she whispered. She gave him a lick on the forehead. Heartpaw smiled. Maybe it wasn't too bad.

"And I'm sorry, about Sandwing," said Heartpaw. His shoulders sagged as he remembered how many cats had died. Honeylight sighed, her eyes clouding. After a moment, Firfrost called her and she left. Heartpaw trotted to the nursery. He heard Roselight's voice and slipped in. The kits looked up at him with big round eyes.

"Hi Roselight," said Heartpaw, hoping he'd be welcomed.

Roselight smiled but ehr eyes were filled with sadness. "I'm really sorry for your loss..." The kits peered at Heartpaw. He smiled at them and crouched near them.

"We're happy to have you back," replied Roselight softly. One of the kits, Briarkit, touched Heartpaw's nose. He grinned.

"You look tired," said Heartpaw. "I'll bring your kits outside to play." Dawnkit, Briarkit and Flamekit's eyes brightened.

"Yay!" they cried. Roselight smiled.

"Thank you," she said. Heartpaw led the kits out. Warriors were gathering to go on border patrol and smiled at Heartpaw although everyone was mourning their loss. Heartpaw stayed busy the whole day. Either playing with the kits or helping make the dens stronger. It helped him keep his mind off the cats who had died. The Clan seemed more empty without Pinestar or Sandwing... He didn't realise he would miss her that much. He sighed. He should have said goodbye properly, he knew she was old and probably sick. And Foxwhisker. It wasn't fair to Roselight. They were going to have kits together, raise them together, see their kits turn into apprentices. He would play with the kits as much as possible. Cinderstar then leapt onto the Tall Stump.

"ShadowClan cats, gather around," she howled. "Heartpaw has come back to us. I have personally forgiven him for whatever mistakes he may have made in the past, but now, it is time to move on. We still mourn the loss of our leader but I need to appoint a new deputy before moonhigh. And as Heartpaw has no more mentor, I shall appoint another mentor to him." Heartpaw watched, curiously. He wondered who Cinderstar would choose. Murmurs rose. Honeylight sat next to Heartpaw. Her fur was warm against him and sent tingles down his spine.

"I say these words before , so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors and Pinestar may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy of ShadowClan is Clawpelt." Cheers rose. Clawpelt stood up, puffing out his chest. His eyes gleaming. He walked up to the Tall Stump.

"Clawpelt, as the new deputy, I will give you your first responsibility. You will be Heartpaw's mentor. I know you will pass on everything you know to him," Cinderstar declared. Heartpaw's heart was racing. Was this good or bad? Cinderstar nodded for him to step up. He took a step forward and Clawpelt advanced, his muscles rippling underneath his fur. He pressed rubbed noses with Heartpaw.

"You will be the best warrior in ShadowClan, my apprentice," Clawpelt whispered into Heartpaw's ear.

# Ch. 55

Heartpaw lunged and raked his sheathed claws onto Clawpelt's side. Clawpelt side stepped and pushed Heartpaw down. Heartpaw gasped for breath.

"I'm stronger and bigger, remember that, use your speed and agility," growled Clawpelt. Heartpaw nodded dizzily. His muscles were tired from a long day of training. He had never trained this much with Pinestar but it was refreshing.

Finally, Heartpaw collapsed in his nest, eyes drooping. The apprentice den felt strangely still and lonely. It was too silent. He forced his eyes open. The apprentice den felt empty but that wasn't the only thing strange. Suddenly, a yowl rose up. Heartpaw was on his feet at once. He raced to the apprentice den entrance and peered out. Dustbreeze skidded to a halt at the camp entrance.

"ThunderClan is coming through our borders!" he screeched, rising the whole Clan. Shouts and growls came up and soon, the whole Clan was awake. Heartpaw raced to the leader's den but stopped at the nursery. He heard Roselight and her kits. He peered inside.

"Stay put," he told them, then noticed there were only two kits. "Where's Briarkit?" Roselight looked at him with worry and fear.

"I just woke up..., and she was gone!" Roselight cried. She got up, her kits scrambled after her.

"No, I'll look for her," Heartpaw assured.

"No, I'll find her," she said.

"No, you need to protect your kits. I'll get Briarkit," Heartpaw said firmly. Reluctantly, Roselight nodded. Heartpaw raced to the camp entrance. Cinderstar was making different

groups.

"Dustbreeze, Clawpelt, Goldenheart, Shadefern, Nightcloud. Go to the tunnel now!" ordered Cindertail. "Skytail, Firfrost, check the Windclan border. Weaselscar, Rabbitleap, Oakfall and Honeylight, get to the ThunderClan border to see if they passed through the Thunderpath. If Clawpelt's patrol needs help, help them!"

"Duskblaze and Darkspeck, go through ShadowClan, make sure ThunderClan is going in from somewhere else," Cindertail said then turned to the rest of the camp. "Spiderfur and Spottedwhisker, stay outside near the entrance and warn us if any cat comes near. The others, I want you here to protect camp."

"Cinderstar! Briarkit is missing," Heartkit said but Cinderstar was talking to Thistlenose.

"Heartpaw, stay put. I'm sure Briarkit is in camp somewhere," Cinderstar said and she raced out of camp. Heartpaw huffed. He looked around. Cats were prowling around camp, listening or practising to fight. Without anybody noticing, he slipped out of camp. Spiderfur spotted him but didn't say anything, his orders were to keep hostile cats out not ShadowClan cats in. Heartpaw slipped away and sniffed the air. He couldn't smell anything. He followed his instinct. Towards the river. The air was still and quiet. He peered through a bush and heard some rustling. He looked down and spotted a bit of fur, Briarkit's fur, on one of the branches of the bramble bush. He smelt it then tracked her faint scent to the river. Suddenly, he saw her. She was scrambling on the ice of the river.

"BRIARKIT!" yelled Heartpaw.

"Mummy! Roselight?" cried Briarkit. Suddenly, the ice broke. Only the middle of the river wasn't frozen and the current ran quickly and strong. Heartpaw sprung forward. Briarkit was pulled by the current, downstream. Heartpaw ran after her. He raced harder, keeping his eyes locked on her small body.

"Stay above the water!" he yelled. Briarkit flailed

wildly. Heartpaw finally overtook her and leaned forward. As the current pulled her past him, he reach out and grabbed her scruff. He hauled her up and out of the water. She shivered from the cold.

"Shake yourself," ordered Heartpaw. Briarkit shook herself and water droplets flew everywhere. Heartkit started to lick her vigorously and her body slowly stopped shaking. He kept giving her warm licks. Finally, she stopped shivering and stayed curled in a ball, breathing gently. Then growls and snarls were heard. Briarkit looked up with worry. Heartpaw cursed himself. They were near ThunderClan border. He grabbed Briarkit by the scruff and brought her near a bramble bush. Suddenly, a cat sprung out from a bush. He had sleek white fur and red piercing eyes. Heartpaw pushed Briarkit into the bush.

"Stay hidden, don't move," he said hurriedly and faced the ThunderClan cat. The white cat launched himself at Heartpaw. Heartpaw dodged by a whisker and turned around, batting the white cat on the head. The cat hissed and flung himself at Heartpaw once more. Heartpaw felt a sharp sting on his shoulder and swung off the cat. He rolled onto the ThunderClan cat and sunk his claws into his sides then took hold of his ear and thrashed his head around angrily. he tasted sweet blood. Suddenly, Clawpelt turned and spotted a dark cat running towards the bush. Heartpaw watched in horror but Clawpelt appeared and shoved the cat to the ground. The white cat clawed at Heartpaw and he quickly twisted away, catching the cat's tail in his mouth. The cat stumbled back and tried to pull away but Heartpaw was not letting go. He clung on and pulled and twisted, drawing blood. The blood tasted sweet on his tongue. He bit in harder and the cat let out a strangled screech. Heartpaw thugged hard, with all his might and the cat jumped at him. Heartpaw rolled away, the tail still in his mouth and the white cat was pulled to the ground with a yelp. Finally, Heartpaw let go and the cat hissed before fleeing. Heartpaw turned to see Clawpelt being brought closer to the river. Heartpaw tackled the dark cat just as Clawpelt lost balance and fell into the river. Heartpaw scrambled up and ran to the river bank and grabbed onto Clawpelt's scruff. After a mad struggle, Clawpelt heaved himself up. Heartpaw looked around and to his horror, he spotted the dark cat. It had Briarkit by the scruff. She mewed piteously. Heartpaw cried

out.

"Get away from her! She's just a kit!" growled Heartpaw. Clawpelt seemed confused for a moment then realised it was Briarkit.

"Oh Darkstorm if you dare harm her...," Clawpelt's voice was soft but menacing and Darkstorm put the kit down but stood between the kit and Heartpaw and Clawpelt.

"Give up and I won't harm the kit," snarled Darkstorm.

"You wouldn't," gasped Heartpaw.

"Clawpelt?" Darkstorm said.

"You know that's not possible," hissed Clawpelt. Darkstorm snarled and his hackles rose but he turned onto Briarkit and picked her up. In a swift motion, Clawpelt leapt at Darkstorm. Darkstorm side stepped and snarled. Then quickly, he snapped Briarkit to the ground. Her neck cracked and Heartpaw was rooted to the spot, fear and horror slowly crawling up his spine. Clawpelt stopped, watching Darkstorm in horror and disbelief.

"You- you KILLED HER!" he howled. Darkstorm growled. Clawpelt started to bat at Darkstorm's face. Heartpaw choked as he saw Briarkit's small body, limp. He crouched at her side. He gave her a small lick. Her eyes were open, big and round with fear. He choked back a sob. He licked her once more then gently closed her eyes. Her neck was twisted and he placed it back to normal. Suddenly, Darkstorm raced past him, leaving a trail of blood. Clawpelt crouched at the kit, panting with blood stained fangs.

"Get back to camp. Bring her. I'm getting Darkstorm," ordered Clawpelt and disappeared. Heartpaw took the kit delicately in his jaw and made his way back to camp, his mind racing. Thoughts of happy Briarkit buzzed in his brain then the thought of never seeing her smile again. He passed Spottedwhisker. She gasped when she saw the kit. Her eyes clouded.

"What-what?" she stammered.

"ThunderClan," Heartpaw managed to utter and she let out a strangled growl. He broke into camp and a few cats turned to him. Murmurs rang out.

"Heartpaw! What happened?" hissed Flamefrost as more cats grouped around in horror.

"ThunderClan cat.., Darkstorm I think. Clawpelt ran after him," answered Heartpaw. Cats bristled at the thought but let Heartpaw pass through to the nursery. He took a deep breath and stepped inside. A shrill cry of sorrow and horror escaped Roselight.

"No no no no no," she murmured. Dawnkit and Flamekit huddled around Roselight, scared at the sight of their sister. Heartpaw put Briarkit down gently in front of Roselight.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. Roselight didn't seem to hear him. She licked her kit repeatedly. Flamekit and Dawnkit watched Briarkit hopeful for her to wake up.

"I'm so sorry," repeated Heartpaw softly.

"What happened?" Roselight asked, her voice breaking and her eyes clouded with grief. Flamekit prodded Briarkit.

"Briarkit? Why aren't you waking up?" he asked his sister. Dawnkit watched, shaking with sadness and fear.

"She was at the river. She fell in. I got her out then a ThunderClan cat came. I hid her in a bush and I fought the cat. Darkstorm, ThunderClan, came out from nowhere and Clawpelt took him on but he fell into the river and when I hauled him up Darkstorm had Briarkit. He didn't care about the warrior code...," explaiend Heartpaw. Roselight looked away, her eyes blank.

"Heartpaw, Cinderstar wants to talk to you," came Oakfall's voice. He looked sadly at Roselight and joined her, beckoning for Heartpaw to go. He sighed but slunk out.

# Ch. 56

Heartpaw slipped out of the nursery. Heartpaw spotted Honeylight and trotted over to her. She smiled.

"How are the kits?" she asked. For a moment, Heartpaw thought she was talking about their kits and made a confused look but he realised she was talking about Dawnkit and Flamekit and he cursed himself for even thinking Honeylight might like him.

"Oh um better," said Heartpaw, sitting next to Honeylight. Lionbreeze was talking loudly with Goldenheart.

"And Roselight?" Honeylight inquired. Roselight had shut the outter world out. She had lost her mate and two of her kits. Heartpaw felt pity for Flamekit and Dawnkit, having lost both his parents. He wondered how life would have been with siblings.

"Not ok, but she still has Flamekit and Dawnkit," said Heartpaw.

"You can't go out! I told you! You're wounded. I'm the medicine cat! For StarClan's sake of course I know what I'm doing!" Lionbreeze's voice carried to Heartpaw.

"You and Lionbreeze ok?" Honeylight said.

"I haven't talked to him. And he's been busy with the injured cats. I think he's avoiding me..., but I don't blame him," Heartpaw said. He suddenly felt more distant to Honeylight and a few awkward moments passed.

"You should talk to him. He's not one to keep a grudge. Plus, if one day you get hurt, he's the one you'll go to," said Honeylight. She smiled and padded away. Heartpaw nodded. He spotted Clawpelt and Cindertail talking. Clawpelt had told him they would leave at noon. Clawpelt finally joined Heartpaw and they headed out.

"Good job yesterday," said Clawpelt as they walked purposefully away.

"But Briarkit...," Heartpaw said.

"She was just a kit after all. We didn't know her personality or her very well, better that way, we're not attached," Clawpelt answered harshly. Heartpaw frowned.

"She didn't deserve it...," whispered Heartpaw. Clawpelt turned around to face Clawpelt.

"But she's dead. So now, let's think about the future. We can't change the past, but we can try and shape the future," said Clawpelt. "Now attack me." Heartpaw crouched and leapt half heartedly. He was snapped out of his sleepy daze when Clawpelt slammed him to the ground.

"Ow," muttered Heartpaw. Clawpelt rolled his eyes and Heartpaw braced himself for another attack. Clawpelt got off.

"Since we're all tired of fighting. Let's go on to hunting. Catch three pieces of prey," ordered Clawpelt and he slipped away. Heartpaw was left alone, slightly confused but he shrugged. He felt better alone. He would be able to sort out his thoughts. He thought about Ivypaw. He wondered if she was a warrior yet. No, of course not, she was a moon younger than him. He didn't feel very connected to her anymore. Like she was a priority. He knew his duty was to his Clan. And although he loved her, he knew Honeylight was kind and would be just as great as Ivypaw. He sighed, why was he even thinking about that? He should be hunting. So he concentrated on prey.

Heartpaw entered camp with two mice and a vole, small and meagre but it was welcomed warmly. Heartpaw brought a mice to Riverclaw. Riverclaw smiled.

"Good to see you again," he said.

"You too," Heartpaw said.

"Any news from the injured cats?" asked Riverclaw,

prodding at the mouse. Heartpaw hadn't had time to visit Goldenheart or Weaselscar who were apparently badly hurt.

"I haven't had time to see them yet. I had training with Clawpelt," said Heartpaw.

"Shame. I would love some company," Riverclaw sighed. Heartpaw apologised and made his way to the medicine den to visit the injured cats. He tingled with nerves at the thought of Lionbreeze but in the end, they wouldn't be able to avoid each other forever.

# Ch. 57

"He had milky fur," said Weaselscar. "I would have easily clawed his eyes off but another huge she-cat came. Ugh." Weaselscar lay on one of the nests. His leg was twisted around and he had bad scratches on his snout. Heartpaw wondered if he'd ever be able to run properly. Apparently, they wouldn't know for some time so Weaselscar was being positive.

"I should be out tonight," said Goldenheart.

"Thanks for visiting," came a rushed voice. Lionbreeze trotted into the den. "But now leave. They must rest."

"Aw, we're just talking," grumbled Weaselscar. "Get's pretty boring here." Heartpaw took a step back. Lionbreeze didn't glance at him. Maybe it was better that way, Heartpaw didn't want to see Lionbreeze's eyes full of hatred. Lionbreeze turned to Heartpaw and narrowed his eyes. They were dark and unforgiving.

"Did you hear me?" Lionbreeze said.

"Yeah," mumbled Heartpaw. "Bye. I'll see you guys."

"Bye, thanks for coming over," Goldenheart smiled. Heartpaw slipped out of the den and joined Honeylight's side. She was eating a vole slowly.

"Can we share?" he asked.

"Ah, sorry, I told Dustbreeze, I was sharing with him," apologised Honeylight. Heartpaw nodded and trotted to the fresh-kill pile and took a small sparrow. He bit into it. It tasted stale and dry but he didn't care. His mind was reeling with thoughts he couldn't place. He sighed and slipped into the apprentice den. He crawled into his nest and listened to the silence. Finally, he found sleep.

*Grey skies. Rain. Wet grass. Heartpaw looked around. His fur was soaked but it was oddly refreshing. He looked around at the grey sky. Lightning lit up the whole sky for a split second. The grumbling of the sky continued as thunder crashed. Another cat appeared. A tortoiseshell. Birghtheart. Heartpaw's heart leaped. He stepped forward. He smiled through the rain and saw Brightheart beam back. She beckoned him to the safety of some bushes.*

*"Brightheart," he murmured.*

*"Dear son," she whispered.*

*"Are you alright?" asked Heartpaw. "Why is it raining? We're in Starclan right?"*

*"Yes," replied Brightheart. "We are."*

*"But why is it raining? Is it a bad sign? Is something happening?" asked Heartpaw frowning. "Where is Stormpelt?"*

*"It is raining," smiled Brightheart. "But whoever told you raining was a bad sign? Rain is beautiful. It feeds the trees, grass, flowers and feeds us water. It refreshes us. Frogs come out. Rain is a new start."*

*"Oh," Heartpaw replied. "Why am I here?"*

*"Oh Heartpaw, hard times are coming. For you and your Clan," she said. "But know, always, that I am are here. StarClan is here. No matter what Clan you're from."*

*"Oh um thanks," replied Heartpaw. "I know. Why are you telling me this?"*

*"So you'll promise me you'll never doubt me," she said. "Ill be proud of you, no matter what." Heartpaw nodded. He gazed into his mother's beautiful eyes and wanted to stay with her, hearing the calming pitter patter of the rain forever. But she seemed to grow farther. Slowly, she seemed to be slipping away. He looked around panicky. But she was gone. Replacing her was just darkness.*

# Ch. 58

Heartpaw woke up to soft sunlight filtering into the apprentice den. He groggily got up and padded to the camp entrance. Clawpelt spotted him and trotted over.

"We're going on border patrol," he informed Heartpaw. Heartpaw's eyes lit up. He might get to go to the WindClan border. He missed Ivypaw but it wasn't a strong tugging in his heart anymore, just a small flicker of interest. He followed Clawpelt out where Darkspeck, Skytail and Duskblaze were waiting. They headed for ThunderClan border to make sure the cats had not tried to cross the border once more. They approached the tunnel near the Thunderpath and Heartpaw sniffed. The ThunderClan scent was fresh on their border but it wasn't new. Clawpelt marked the border and even entered the tunnel slightly to mark it. Then he flicked his tail to the patrol and they moved on.

"If they had the nerve to attack again," bristled Skytail.

"Don't worry, we showed them that night," Clawpelt hissed, slipping to the front of the patrol. "They're not coming anywhere near ever again." Heartpaw nodded.

"We must not forget WindClan though," said Darkspeck through gritted teeth. "They might think us weak after ThunderClan attacked."

"That's why were headed there," Duskblaze rolled her eyes. Darkspeck just grunted. Finally, Heartpaw could smell the soft scent of WindClan, like a sweet and soft scent of adventure bu safety as well. Clawpelt squinted at the moor while Darkspeck and Skytail marked the border. Heartpaw helped them then joined Clawpelt as they gazed at the tall grasses. Suddenly, there was some rustling. A patrol of WindClan cats appeared. A grey, messy furred warrior barred his fangs.

"What are you looking at? Thinking of stealing our prey?" he growled. Clawpelt narrowed his eyes at the warrior and cocked his head slightly. He watched the warrior for a moment, his tail twitching. Heartpaw wondered what he was going to say.

"We don't need to Galestrike," said Clawpelt in a controlled and authoritative voice which gave shivers down Heartpaw's spine. He could see the WindClan cats shuffling nervously. Galestrike seemed the most disturbed that Clawpelt knew his name.

"Oh yes, I do know your names. I'm the deputy, it's my job," he grinned. Then he turned to a white almost grey she-cat. "Hello Cloverwish. And Foxstep." A ginger tom with a few white markings narrowed his eyes. Clawpelt's eyes wandered to a big and muscular cat with brown striped fur. "Oh and Newtfang." Newtfang barred her teeth and lashed her tail.

"Enough of this fakery!" she growled. She turned and nodded for the patrol to move on. Clawpelt chuckled.

"Let's go ShadowClan," he said. Heartpaw marvelled.

"How did you know all of them?" he asked his mentor. Clawpelt smiled and flicked his tail.

"I'll tell you later," he turned to Skytail, Darkspeck and Duskblaze. "I'm taking Heartpaw for training now." The three cats nodded and padded away. Heartpaw turned to Clawpelt, feleing excited for whatever they were going to learn.

"Let's see if you know how to fight," he told Heartpaw.

"Of course I do. I know all the moves," Heartpaw exclaimed.

"Let's see if you can use them well without having to think about it," Clawpelt said and leapt. Heartpaw quickly ducked and turned around to run his sheathed claws on Clawpelt's side. Clawpelt twisted around in time though and caught Heartpaw on the head. He tumbled to the ground and before he knew it, Clawpelt was on him. He squirmed and rolled and batted

randomly.

"You're forgetting everything," huffed Clawpelt. "Come on, Heartpaw, think. Don't just randomly roll about." Heartpaw took a deep breath and thought. He let his muscles relax and felt Clawpelt's grip lessen. Then quickly, he slipped out of Clawpelt's grasp. He tried to go for a back kick but Clawpelt pushed him to the ground once more. They leapt, crouched, rolled and wrestled till Heartpaw was out of breath and Clawpelt agreed to a break. Heartpaw sunk to his knees and took deep breaths of the cool air. Leaf-bare had arrived but it was a warm day. He put his head up to the sun, letting it tickle his chin.

Heartpaw spotted Honeylight and trotted over to her but noticed she was absorbed in a conversation with Dusbtreeze. With a shrug he turned around and almost bumped into Firfrost. Firfrost smiled shyly. Heartpaw smiled back.

"Hey," said Firfrost. "Um. How you doing?" Heartpaw, grateful for the effort to be friendly, walked beside Firfrost to the fresh-kill pile.

"Great," Heartpaw said. "We had such an intense training today! Clawpelt almost shredded me to bits!" Heartpaw looked down when he realised he was talking like an excited apprentice, apprentice to apprentice. But Firfrost was a warrior now.

"That's cool," Firfrost answered. "Clawpelt is an exceptional warrior." Heartpaw nodded. Firfrost glanced around the clearing then leaned to Heartpaw's ear.

"I think I might be in love," he said. Heartpaw almost burst out laughing but seeing Firfrost's serious face, he closed his mouth.

"Who is it?" Heartpaw said, scanning the clearing.

"Don't tell *anybody*," Firfrost said. "Not even Honeylight."

"Of course," Heartpaw assured.

"Darkspeck," Firfrost said. Heartpaw thought of the stubborn and strong warrior. She was scary at times but she was

loyal and a brave warrior.

"Aw, that's cute," Heartpaw said. "Do you talk to her?"

"I try to," Firfrost said. "But I just get nervous."

"Ha," laughed Heartpaw. Firfrost growled at him but smiled.

"It's not funny," he protested.

"Uh, yes it is," grinned Heartpaw.

"Stop laughing! Someone might see you. *She* might see you," Firfrost said, shooting paranoid looks around.

"Um, there's literally nobody here and she'll obviously see us if she was here, she has eyes, doesn't she?" Heartpaw said. Firfrost sighed.

"Anyways," Heartpaw said. "I dare you to talk to her. Make the first move." Firfrost frowned.

"You *dare* me?" He said nervously.

"Yeah. If she rejects you, just tell her it was a dare," shrugged Heartpaw. Firfrost looked unsure and shuffled on his feet but finally nodded.

"Right," he said. "I'll do it." Heartpaw grinned and watched Firfrost march away purposefully to look for Darkspeck. Heartpaw looked up. The sun was setting. He wondered if Ivypaw would be waiting for him. Probably not. But he slipped out of camp anyways. He knew he shouldn't be. He literally just went into isolation because he was seeing Ivypaw. He halted and looked around. A bush rustled. He shouldn't see her. It was against the warrior code. He couldn't betray his Clan once more. They had forgiven him, trusted him not to see her again. He looked up at the sky. Red, orange, yellow and pink ribbons of colours danced across the sky. It got darker. Purple, dark blue, dark red. Heartpaw made his way towards WindClan. He cringed. What was he doing? He needed to forget about her. The sun had almost set. It was a dark

blue. Heartpaw's mind was reeling. He could just see Ivypaw for once. She probably wouldn't be there anyway. The sun had set. The sky was black. Stars sparkled and the moon rose slowly.

"Where are you going?" came a voice. Sweet. Heartpaw turned to see Honeylight.

"Nowhere. Just watching the sunset," said Heartpaw, spotting the bright moon.

"You're debating whether or not to see that WindClan cat, aren't you?" narrowed Honeylight's eyes. Heartpaw felt a shiver of fear. How did she know? Would she tell.

"No of course not!" cried Heartpaw quickly. Honeylight laughed and ran her tail on his shoulder, pushing down his fur which was rising.

"Relax, I was just joking," she giggled. Heartpaw let out a sigh of relief and they padded towards the river.

"So are you and Dustbreeze something..?" Heartpaw asked finally. Honeylight turned to him and smiled then nodded. Heartpaw frowned. He hadn't thought she'd move on so quickly. He hadn't thought she would have chosen Dustbreeze of all cats. He was...old. He realised he was feeling a tinge of jealous. He tried to crush it down quickly with apathy.

"Why that face?" she said. Heartpaw tried to smile through his grimace. "He's not that old! He's like eight moons older than me..." Heartpaw raised his eyebrows.

"Hey!" protested Honeylight. "That's only two seasons." Heartpaw shrugged to show he didn't care. But he certainly thought it weird. They walked along side each other for a while in silence.

"So um, are you guys having... er kits," Heartpaw asked awkwardly.

"Heartpaw!" cried Honeylight, bursting into laughter. Then she turned serious. "Not yet. Hopefully." Heartpaw nodded, not knowing what else to say. He felt as if she had found someone

else, their friendship must be over.

"Hey, our friendship isn't over," Honeylight told him, prodding him playfully. "We're still friends." Heartpaw forced a smile. They headed back to camp and slipped in. Honeylight whispered goodnight to Heartpaw and slipped into the warriors' den. Heartpaw returned to the lonely apprentice den and closed his eyes. Although it was quiet, the silence was deep and piercing, keeping Heartpaw from sleep. He wondered about Ivypaw. Had she found someone else? Probably. He would never be able to see her again.

# Ch. 59

Could somebody's life be thrown upside down in half a day? It seemed like only Heartpaw's could. He woke up to a horrible yowling and hissing. He quickly jumped up and leapt to the den entrance. He peered outside and spotted Oakfall and Duskblaze, fighting three cats. Suddenly, more warriors poured into the clearing, hissing and spitting at the newcomers. More rogues slipped into camp. Heartpaw watched, mesmerized, unable to move as his Clanmates threw themselves into a frenzied battle. Rogues fought without mercy and tirelessly. Then Heartpaw spotted a grey mottled cat. His eyes almost fell out. Rio. He gave a yelp of surprise and Rio spotted him. He grinned evilly and ran to Heartpaw. Heartpaw was so surprised he couldn't move but finally, he managed to crouch and growl. Rio leapt at him, claws extended. Heartpaw was rolled into the middle of the battle. Howls and growls echoed around. Whimpers and hisses of pain were almost just as loud. Heartpaw battled furiously. He didn't know what Rio was doing there but he just wanted him to leave. Rio finally pinned Heartpaw down.

"Surprised?" he said. Heartpaw's chest heaved. His muscles ached and his body was tired. He had terrible gashes on his side. Rogues fought furiously around him. More than he could count. They definitely outnumbered his Clanmates. He heard a whimper and spotted Honeylight limping.

"What are you doing here?" growled Heartpaw, trying to wriggle away. Rio tightened his grip.

"Getting my revenge," he hissed. Heartpaw grimaced. Rio then sunk his claws into Heartpaw's side. Heartpaw cried out in pain then flung Rio off with a sudden burst of strength. He batted at Rio's face, claws unsheathed. He caught Rio on the left eye but Rio only shook himself and bristled. Heartpaw leapt, bit and scratched until his whole body felt as if it were about to topple over. But ShadowClan was strong and even outnumbered they fared well

against some of the inexperienced rogues. Finally Cindertail managed to call a stop to the rogues. Clawpelt had pinned Rio down and was holding him off with other cats.

"Get out of our territory," hissed Cinderstar. "You have no right to be here. We have done nothing to you. Get out or die." Rio just smiled.

"Ah," he sighed. "So Heartpaw hasn't told you?" His Clanmates turned to him, all panting and blood pourind all over. Lionbreeze was working his way through the most wounded cats, trying his best to heal them as best as he could. Heartpaw bristled, suddenly scared.

"Told us what?" interrogated Cinderstar with narrowed eyes. Clawpelt gazed at Heartpaw with questioning.

"That he came to visit us during isolation. He asked for shelter. We gave it to him. And he ran away to avoid paying us back. You see, we're just here to get back what he owns us," Rio explained. Heartpaw felt his Clanmates' eyes on him. He looked down at his paws. Cinderstar stared down at him.

"Is this true? Heartpaw?" Cinderstar asked. Heartpaw managed a feeble nod. Clawpelt let out a hiss.

"And you didn't think to mention this to us?" Clawpelt said.

"I didn't think it was important," Heartpaw managed. Rio laughed but Clawpelt lunged and slashed him across the face. Rio stumbled back, his eyes wide with surprise. A few rogues, Heartpaw could barely recognise growled at Clawpelt but didn't do anything.

"You owed rogues something!" Cinderstar growled.

"We only came here to get it back," shrugged Rio innocently. Clawpelt growled.

"Get out!" hissed Cinderstar. She swiped one of the rogues near her across the face and nodded to Clawpelt and a few cats. They hissed at the rogues and brought them out of camp.

Heartpaw looked around in silence. His Clanmates collapsed to the ground, some badly wounded. Lionbreeze was trying to help as many cats as he could at the same time. Firfrost padded closer to Heartpaw.

"You brought them here," he whispered sadly. "You know it will not be forgiven." Lionbreeze approached and barred his fangs. Heartpaw looked away.

"Spottedwhisker is going to die because of you!" he accused. Heartpaw looked to a spot where Spottedwhisker lay, breathing shallowly. Her pelt was coated in blood. Suddenly, the patrol came back and Lionbreeze quickly rushed to help them. Cinderstar brushed him off and she and Clawpelt approached Heartpaw. The whole Clan watched him.

"You led them here," Clawpelt said finally. He stared at his apprentice in distaste. Lionbreeze whispered something into Clawpelt's ear and he turned to look at Spottedwhisker with sadness. Cinderstar closed her eyes then opened them again. Some cats had crowded over Spottedwhisker's body.

"You were the cause of one of our cat's death," Cinderstar announced. Heartpaw looked down in terrible guilt, shame and mostly, fear. He hadn't meant any of this to happen. He hadn't meant for his Clanmate to die.

"You will not go by unpunished," continued Cinderstar. Her voice seemed to be far away. Heartpaw knew what was coming. He would have nobody ever again. Everything he knew would be gone. It was as if the world was against him. He finally concentrated on Cinderstar's voice to hear her last words, ringing clear in his head.

"..banishment," she declared. Heartpaw felt his heart sink. A few cats howled in agreement. Clawpelt prodded him.

"Say your goodbye and leave," he muttered in Heartpaw's ear. Heartpaw looked around at his Clanmates, his family. They watched him in distaste. Nobody wanted to meet his eye. He looked for Firfrost but he was gazing fixedly at Darkspeck. He looked for

Honeylight. She looked back at him and shook her head sadly. Disappointment. He choked back a sob. Clawpelt narrowed his eyes and prodded Heartpaw. He headed, as if in a daze, towards the camp entrance. Clawpelt watched him till he was gone. Heartpaw stumbled blindly. Finally, he found the Thunderpath. His mind was whirling. It was a mess in his head. His body ached, blood poured down from scratches. His whole world was toppling. His family had betrayed him. No, he had betrayed them. His mind was a mess as he stumbled and limped across the Thunderpath, half hoping a monster would kill him. He finally fell into tall grasses. It was soft and calm. He wanted to lay there, not worry about anything forever. Then a grumble was heard and cold, wet rain started to pour. Of course, he was cursed, he couldn't even lay in the grass for a while without having something bad happen. The rain poured down endlessly, unforgiving. It soaked in Heartpaw's fur and mingled with blood. His body grew cold but he didn't care. The drumming of rain was all Heartpaw could think about. Rain. Just rain. Everybody had abandoned him. He was nobody. As his thoughts delved deeper into his head, he heard a voice. Sweet. Brighteart.

"Rain is beautiful.." Her voice was the only thing which was clear in his mind. Rain. What had she told him before? Rain wasn't a bad sign. Rain was good. It helped things grow. Animals came out in the rain. Rain renewed things. Rain was a new beginning.

# // Second book //

**I really hoped you liked it. I'm not a professional or anything and I was just writing for fun so don't be too hard please :)**

**I'll be writing the sequel, under the same name except it'll be number two. There wasn't supposed to be a sequel but as it's way longer than I thought, I'll just make another one or this book will be way too long.**

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